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Editorial Perspective

Nandigram and Taslima Episodes

The two episodes – Nandigram and the expulsion of Taslima Nasreen from Kolkata, both in the CPI (M) run West Bengal – have exposed our weaknesses as never before. Nandigram brought to light the lack of policy formulation at the national level on such vital economic issues, as land acquisition for industrialization and other purposes. The ideal situation was to be a decision based on the consensus among Indian political parties. The lack exposes the Congress, BJP, the left and all other parties to popular audit, which they are not going to face due to obvious reasons. Apart from this glaring weakness of our political system, the two episodes have exposed the hypocrisy of our political parties, intellectual and the political/academic/social activists.

For nine months, Nandigram was virtually a war zone. Trinamul Congress cadres and the activists of Bhumi Uchchhed Pratirodh Committee (BUPC), with least regard for democratic norms and procedures, indulged in violent acts of intimidation, arson and beating. Of course, the game was initiated by violence-prone highly-armed CPI (M) cadres. The former prevented CPI (M) sympathizers from coming to their homes. Moreover, the Trinamul Congress did not consider it wrong to align with the communal, extremist (Naxalite) and criminal elements. The CPI (M) cadres recaptured Nandigram by adopting the same technique about which Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, the West Bengal Chief Minister, said that the protesters were "paid back in their own coin". While saying so he forgot that he heads an elected government which is supposed to work within law and it was his government's duty to protect the citizens, irrespective of their being the followers of the left front or the Trinamul Congress or none. The violence by the cadre of the ruling combination was certainly more culpable. The conduct of the police in being silent spectators compounds the sins of the ruling party. The mass graves, with the skeletons of the persons killed – including women and children — at Nandigram exposes the weaknesses of the politics and administration of the state.

Highly selective attitude of the left – parties, organizations and individuals – towards violence, citizen's suffering and discrimination is a well-known phenomena. Leftist intellectuals like Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali advised against criticizing the CPI (M)'s doings in Nandigram as, according to them, it amounted to playing into the US' 'imperialist' hands. The statements of party affiliated academics – Irfan Habib, Prabhat and Utsa Patnaik, and others – on Nandigram practically condoned the violence and seem to regret that it has provided an opportunity to the BJP and others to attack the Left Front government, rather than condemn.

Kolkata had a peace rally a month ago by the intellectuals of West Bengal protesting against the violence in Nandigram. It was followed by another peace rally by the CPI (M) affiliated intellectuals. Even NBA leader joined the chorus of protest. The question is: why there was no timely protest by the intellectuals of Kolkata when CPI (M) supporters of Nandigram were prevented from coming to their homes for so long? How to justify their insensitivity towards the sufferings of the latter?

In the aftermath of these developments, a protest rally was organized by All India Minority Forum (AIMF) to focus on the Nandigram issue. The focus, however, shifted from politico-economic issue of resettlement at Nandigram to that of the extension of visa to Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen. There were slogans demanding her ouster and non-extension of the visa. The agitators started road blockade, attacked passing vehicles and even police personnel. The motive behind yoking of the two unrelated issues and the shift of focus was obviously communal. They wanted to provoke the security forces and create a violent situation in larger area. The West Bengal government called in the army and the situation was brought under control. What was more shameful and hypocritical on the part of the state government was the unceremonious shift of Ms. Nasreen to Jaipur without even informing the Rajasthan govt. She charged that the Kolkata police pressurised her to leave that city. CPI (M) leader and Left Front chairman Biman Bose's unscrupulous statement was equally shocking. He said that the Bangladeshi writer must leave Kolkata if her stay disturbed the peace. He, however, retracted his statement next day. It shockingly revealed that vote-bank politics has sunk to its nadir and secular pretensions of the Left Front was in shreds.

Ms. Nasreen is basically a humanist writer. She constantly writes against the human rights violation against the Hindu minority – most of whom not yet forced to leave that country are Dalit Namshudras — and women of her country. Obviously, it is not liked by Muslim fundamentalists of Bangladesh. The fact, which has come to light in the last four months in this country, is more revealing and shocking that Muslim fundamentalists' thinking in Bangladesh and in India is identical and the extremists on both sides of the border have joined hands against her. Taslima Nasreen was attacked in Hyderabad by some Muslim fundamentalists in August this year; she was again targeted in Kolkata the other day; and when she reached Jaipur, a Muslim organization threatened her and she was shifted to Delhi. As reported she is virtually under house arrest.

Ms.Nasreen is not an average writer, as his critics allege. She is a brave lady with tremendous moral courage. Though hounded by the religious fanatics of her country, she continued to speak for the oppressed sections of her people. She was forced to seek shelter in Scandinavian countries and then stayed in Kolkata for few years up to the other day. And now there is pressure from Islamist groups to turn her out of the country. We are happy that Pranab Mukherjee, our External Affairs Minister, has assured her asylum, advised her restraint. In the meantime, Ms Nasreen has withdrawn the two pages of her book, *Dwikhandito*, basing on which the West Bengal government banned the book earlier. Incidentally, Calcutta High Court did not find anything objectionable in the book. The question is: whose verdict should run in this country? Court's or that of the fundamentalist pressure groups, which frequently indulge in violence and rioting to force the malleable governments to bend rather than taking action against them? Besides, the question remains: If Ms. Nasreen got, visa and extensions for the last four years after writing her alleged passages what has changed now for the government to surrender?

The pressure tactics of the Islamist outfits worked when they forced the governments, on both sides of the borders, to ban *Lajja,* which only truthfully depicted the sad state of minority affair in Bangladesh *Dwikhandito* was banned as it described the sad plight of the womenfolk. These undesirable steps of banning the books emboldened the bigots to indulge in rioting. The latest act of the drama has already been enacted. The governments, rather than taking action against the professional offence mongers, have submitted to them. The competitive politics of vote-bank has emboldened them so much that one declares publicly to pay Rs 5 five lakh as the price of her head and goes unpunished.

After withdrawal of the passages from her book, Maulana Mahmood Madani, general ecretary of Jamait Ulema-e-Hind has excused her, but not the other outfits.

State leader of the Jamait and convener of the Milli Ittehad Parishad – a forum of 12 outfits – Siddiqullah Choudhury said: "Madani Saheb was probably not fully aware of the blasphemous contents of Taslima's Bengali books. ... We should not judge her today's words but wait to she what see does". One of his colleagues advised the state not to take the "extra burden of hosting her again", as it is already "burdened" with Nandigram. Obviously, what happened in Central Kolkata the other day was not the last act of the drama.

The Taslima Nasreen episode has put a big question mark before the country as a secular democracy. We are face-to-face with our hypocrisy today. The ruling elite continued to suffer from myopia, and allowed the change in demographic texture and growth of fundamentalism/terrorist modules for short-term political gain. The price is eventually to be paid. The silence of our intellectuals/academicians, especially the so- called liberals –except for few exceptions like Mahashweta Devi — in this case is puzzling. Some of them have the temerity of comparing Taslima Nasreen with M.F. Hussain. What should be worrying us is that this episode has equated us with Bangladesh, which is a declared Islamic state, and sent a message that if you put a religious gloss on your violent activities, the state shall succumb and start rationaling its cowardice. The bottom line in this case is that it is not Taslima Nasreen who is on trial, it is the Indian State which has failed its people and its Constitution. It also needs mention that these developments have revealed the real colour of Indian intellectuals; it has, once more, confirmed that they are mere politicized mercenaries and activists.

Tackling Terror and Insurgency

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, while addressing the chief ministers on internal security on December 20, 2007, referred to the Dantewara jailbreak and described Naxalism as a "virus" and the "single biggest" security challenge to the Indian State. He said that "every possible step must be taken to free our citizens from the shadow of terror", and reiterated the "need to cripple the hold of Naxalite forces with all the means at our command". He asked the chief ministers to cut the flow of funds to Naxals who extort money from contractors and *tendu patta* operations in the hinterland. The message was clear: "Crush Naxals", "Can't rest in peace before virus is eliminated". He warned that Naxalite violence could intensify; he also underlined the need of precise and actionable intelligence as the key to fighting them. The Prime Minister wanted the states to raise special force to crush Naxalism and assured all help to them. He wanted the vacant posts of the police force in the states to be filled up.

None will disagree that the menace of Naxalism cannot be eliminated without what the Prime Minister wants. Not only that these steps are essential even to curb the ethnic insurgency in the North-East and the resurgence of terrorism promoted by Islamist networks spread throughout the country. Here it needs mention, and it is unfortunate, that such announcements, made at the heated moments, are often forgotten after the lapse of time. Let us hope such things will not happen this time and the states will faithfully implement what the Prime Minister advised. However, as a word of caution, it may be said that only the steps mentioned above will not lead us to success in this war against terrorism. The war shall have to be fought and won on several fronts.

The terrorists – whether ultra-left, ethnic or Islamist jehadis – have many support lines. Many cases have come to light that they help and, in turn, are helped by the politicians/political parties, even bureaucrats and others. A large number of foreign agencies directly or indirectly provide support to the terrorist and insurgent outfits. They receive help from our neighbouring countries; have networking with the terrorist outfits of this country and that of the foreign ones. This includes intra- and inter-national human rights organizations. All the support lines should be severed and the propaganda in their support be properly answered if we want to succeed in the fight against terrorism.

The strongest support, which the terrorist and secessionist of this country receive, is from a section of our intellectuals and mediamen. The latter help the former by justifying their wrong deeds in one way or the other, churn out myths, distort their deeds and create confusion in the minds of the common man about terrorist outfits. By such actions, they establish the credibility of the terror groups in public mind; a general impression is created that the insurgents fight for the just cause and for the good of the society. Often the Naxalite terror is justified on the plea that there is injustice in the society and their fight is against the same; that they fight for the poor and the deprived. They ignore the simple fact that the proclaimed Naxalite struggle is for capturing power and power alone; that the victims of the Naxalite terror, except for few exceptions, are only the poorest of the poor; that their guns are pointed mostly towards the victims of injustice and not towards the perpetrators of injustice. Development works in the Naxal- infested areas badly suffers because they exact levy on the development funds and protect the most corrupt officers. Naxalites have rehabilitated the criminals most. The situation in the areas infested by ethnic and jehadi outfits are in no way better. Unfortunately, the intellectual front is the weakest one for the Central and the State governments in the fight against the terror.

It is also the crisis of delivery system and governance which should draw our immediate attention. The State machineries must be sensitized to ensure that it delivers. Fiscal mismanagement, corruption and leakage of resources should be controlled. It is sad that these maladies persist even in the States which are severely affected by Naxalite menace. Take the case of Jharkhand. According to a survey conducted by *Prabhat Khabar,* a popular daily published from Ranchi and elsewhere, Rs 1596 crore was eaten up by the officials and terrorist outfits in a year out of the money allotted for different development schemes. District-wise commission rates were Hazaribagh (50%), Dumka (50%), Ramgarh (50%), Giridih (45%), Simdega (45%), Gumla (40%), Gadhwa (40), Pakur (36%), Jamtara (35%) and Koderma (28%). Scheme-wise commission rates were Rural Development (51%), Irrigation Schemes (56%), Road Construction (54%), NAREGA (35%), Public Distribution System (50%), District Level Schemes 45%), MESO Schemes (39%), Construction work in Education Department (56%) and Indira Awas Yojana (26%). This is not only the index of corruption in an acutely terrorist- infested state, but also the index of corruption, mal-administration, fiscal-mismanagement, insensitivity and lack of political will. The outcome on the terror fight front may be well-imagined.

Myopic decisions at the top due to selfish political reasons are also coming in the way of solving the problems. The government's political squeamishness over Islamist terror, for example, has led to rely on Technical intelligence (Techint) only rather than on Techint and Humint (Human Intelligence) both. We are still going soft on the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh in spite of the aliens' increasing involvement in day to day terrorist acts and networking between the terrorists of all kinds. In the light of the recent developments, it is necessary to have a foolproof national policy on terrorism. .There should be free flow of information on terrorism and no to self-imposed censure.

Caste and the Social Justice

Lyall, a British colonial functionary in India, propounded a myth that "India is a confused entity of castes, tribes, religions, sects, languages, dialects, etc., and the only uniting factor is the British Empire". For him, India was an imaginary state administratively created by the British and the Indian society, for him, was an unrelated, even conflicting diversity. Keeping the empire's interest in mind, the colonial masters summoned the resources – both material and intellectual – to conduct all kinds of surveys, including ethnographic and linguistic, caste surveys; planned monographs on castes and tribes, aimed at focusing on Indian divide. No attempt was made to develop macro perception of Indian society based on the micro studies with a view to discover the grand unity and cultural continuum. The Aryan aggression theory, the racist interpretation of the society, culture and history, and all such myths and hypotheses were the part of the same game. The aim was to divide with the colonial interest in mind.

Abbe J.A. Dubois advised war against the intellectual Hinduism and denigration of the Brahmins, without which, according to him, it was not possible to convert Indians to Christianity. The caste system and the Brahmins were considered to be the greatest obstacles in the way of proselytization to the new faith. The Christian missionaries also joined with greater zeal in denigrating caste and the Brahmins and in the researches highlighting Indian social divide. St. Xavier thought that the Brahmins, being highly revered class, stood between Christianity and the heathens and, therefore, they should be destroyed. A strategy was proposed that Hinduism should be used against Hinduism. Things became more complicated, when the Communists joined the game.

While demonizing the Brahmins and denigrating the caste, two myths were created: (i) the Brahmins debarred other castes from getting education, and (ii) the caste system was highly exploitative and oppressive. Fortunately for us, many earlier foreign writers were comparatively more honest. Their writings of late 18th and early 19th century disprove the myths. English educated Indian scholars often ignore such valuable documents, as they have developed a perverted outlook towards the institution of caste due to colonized mindset. They have developed the habit of viewing their own society through borrowed vision.

Poverty and illiteracy were the gifts of British colonialism to this vast country. In spite of burning of the libraries and destruction of educational institutions during the Sultanate and Moghal periods, the education and literacy was more in India when the British came. Similarly, poverty increased during the British rule. The British, during the early period of their rule, conducted surveys in the presidencies of Madras and Bombay to ascertain the state of indigenous education. The Madras Report by Sir Thomas Munro, the Governor, was very extensive. The same was the case of *Survey of Indigenous Education in the Province of Bombay* and the unofficial report of W. Adam, *A Report on the State of Education in Bengal* (1835, 1836, 1838). Punjab came under British rule only in 1849. G.W. Leitner, the Principal of Government College, Lahore, and sometime the Director of Public Instruction, Punjab, prepared a report, which was published as *History of Indigenous Education in the Punjab since Annexation and in 1882*. Dharampal, basing on these surveys and the data collected in British and Indian archives, wrote *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century*.

These surveys/reports and the books disprove many myths prevailing in India about our education. These studies reveal that education was widespread and practically every village had one or more school; the education was for all; teachers were from all the communities including Dalits. The data counters the popular myth spread by the colonial administrators and Christian missionaries that education in India was monopolized by the Brahmins. For example, in Madras Presidency, less than 25% students attending traditional elementary and advanced institutions of learning were Brahmins (the percentage was still less in today's Tamil Nadu); 48.8% were Shudras and 15.7% were still lower castes, including untouchables. In Bengal and Bihar, the percentage of Brahmin students was less than 25% and that of the teachers only 11%. The claim of the missionaries about their role in the education of the low castes was exposed by Adam. Thirteen missionary schools of Burdwan had only one Chandal, three Dom and not even one Mochi students, whereas, the traditional schools had sixty, fifty-eight and sixteen students respectively of these communities.

By plugging the traditional source of income from the revenue of the land allotted for the purpose and pauperization of the local chieftains who supported such schools, the British, systematically, destroyed the traditional indigenous system of education. The country further relapsed into illiteracy and ignorance.

India was still the richest country of the world when the British arrived on Indian scene by the end of 17th century. They systematically destroyed our crafts and village industries, the prosperous artisans became poor landless labourers. They increased land revenue four-times or more, breaking the backbone of agriculture, introduced barbaric *begari* system as an extra tool of plunder. They were responsible for introducing exploitative *Jamindari* system. They introduced highly expensive system of administration and in this endeavour they made local rulers their partners. The Maharaja of Jaipur was getting Rs.1000 till 1818 for his expenses. As soon as the British took the princely state under their protection, the expenditure became Rs.1000 per day. The other expenses of the state were curtailed. The topmost officer of Tipu Sultan, the governor of Chitradurg, was getting only a hundred rupees a month; whereas a labourer at that time was getting Rs.4 a month. The English District Collector and the member of the Governor's Council started getting Rs.1500 and Rs 6000 to Rs 8000 respectively. The wages of the labourers and craftsmen became one-third or at best half in Karnatak in 1850 in comparison to that in 1760. Thus the British were responsible for making this country extremely poor.

The various data, reports and District Gazetteers reveal that the lowest castes in the society were well-placed and well paid in the villages and in the village administration. A report showing consumption pattern of the people graded in three groups and 23 items consumed by them including rice, ghee, oil, clothes, even betel-nut, could not find any appreciable difference in their consumption pattern except in quality of rice and clothes, number of betel-nut consumed by the families of the three grades and a few minor details. In Agra, even the poorest man did not eat *khichri* without ghee. The early European observers were astonished to find no appreciable difference between the lifestyles of the rich and well-placed and that of the poor ones in this country. The British plundered this country; pauperized it to the extreme; made the people illiterate; and shamelessly blamed the oppressed for the same.

Only a thousand years ago, Al-Beruni came. He mentions about the existence of only four castes in the Indian society and all of them were taking food at one place. Thus fission of four castes (in reality *varnas*) into thousands of castes and sub-castes and untouchability is certainly a post-Turk phenomenon. The negative developments included change from economic to matrimonial parameter, shrinking of the sphere of endogamy; conversion of guilds into endogamous castes. Caste, in the present form and as perceived by the Western scholars and the missionaries, is a negative development; casteism promoted and strengthened by the colonial Census establishment and post-independence Indian politicians is the worst. Al-Beruni mentions about the plunder, destruction and loss of Hindu sciences due to Mahmud's aggressions. The sciences retired far away from the areas of aggression, the society relapsed into ignorance. Our wisdom is preserved only by our neighbours in many cases. For example, out of 4,000 Sanskrit books translated in Tibetan, only 200 are traceable today in this country.

The material and mental poverty brought sufferings and social evils, such as deprivation and untouchability. The civil society and the state should join hands to eliminate the last traces of the same. The success may be delayed if the creamy layers of the deprived sections of our society become insensitive and develop vested interests in acting as pressure groups, pocketing the benefits for their families and relatives only, and thereby perpetuating the evil. The individuals, families and groups, who are benefited by availing the benefits of positive discrimination, must leave the field for less fortunate ones. The violent competition to claim primitivity must end and end soon

— B.B. Kumar

North-East Scan

Contest to be Labeled Primitive

Pradip Phanjoubam*

What a parody. And now Meitei followers of the Sanamahi religion want to be classified as tribals. It is a parody because there is almost a contest today to be backward and primitive, not for anything else, but for the sake of some preferential treatment in the government scheme of things. Pride and dignity in the ability to take the world head on without needing props is becoming a thing of the past.

True there are situation in which certain sections of the society which have lagged behind because of unfair historical reasons need to be extended the liberal state's facilities of positive discrimination, but this is a bitter medicine to enable these sections to catch up and be at a par with the rest before open competition becomes the rule again. A very curious twist in the understanding of the terms tribal, tribalism, backwardness etc has happened because of the nature of statutory incentive structuring. Today these terms are no longer a sociological condition but a Constitutional definition.

Under the circumstance the criteria that make somebody a tribal is not about primitiveness of lifestyles, customs, worships etc, but simply a matter of finding a place in the Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In the Indian context then, we are no longer talking about "tribes" in the real sense of the term, but "Schedule Tribes". For surely, a Class-I Central government officer from the tribal belt of the northeast for instance, posted in New Delhi, owning a flat, car, mobile phone, bonds in the money market, and for whom credit cards are virtual oxygen for survival in the advance market economy, cannot by any stretch of imagination, be still considered a "tribal" except by the sterile definition given by the Constitution.

The truth is, the Constitution continues to stick to its definition, hence the mad race to be defined thus, the latest to join in being the followers of the Sanamahi religion. This is close on the heels of

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* Editor: Imphal Free Press.

Adivasis in Assam. Last month, the world witnessed the shocking incident in Guwahati's Beltola when Adivasi demonstrators, demanding to be classified as tribals in Assam, were savaged by residents of the area, after, it is reported, the demonstrators started rampaging shops in the vicinity and cars parked on the roadside.

All of us also watched with horror on the television, an Adivasi woman demonstrator atrociously stripped and physically abused by the mob, even as onlookers did nothing more than click pictures on their mobile phones. Some of these images later found their way into the newsrooms of various newspapers and satellite television channels.

The reprisal was reprehensible and deserves universal condemnation, but having said this, it is essential to go beyond the immediate. What is it that made the Adivasis in Assam, who are the descendants of indentured labours brought from the tribal belt of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, to the state by the British during colonial days to work on their tea estates, suddenly decide they should be classified as tribals. Should a tribal who has volitionally shifted from his original land and tribal environment be still entitled to be called a tribal, is the million rupees question.

Well known academic from the region Sanjib Barua in a recent article in *The Telegraph* tried to tackle the problematic question. The reason why the Adivasis (tea tribes as they are also known as) of Assam landed in Assam's tea estate and not in the sugar cane plantations in Mauritius, Fiji Islands or the Caribbean, is just a matter of their having signed on different labour contract forms of the then British India government. Descendants of those who went to these other destinations have rose to be Prime Ministers and Presidents or win the Nobel Prize. Would it be appropriate to call Sir Vidya S Naipaul a tribal? Would he like the idea? Doubtful.

The Meitei Sanamahi followers must reconsider their decision. Reservation would only deepen their addiction to government jobs, and in the process prevent the diversification of the place's economy. Vietnam's miracular resurgence after the devastation of 30 years of war, is attributed to such a diversification of economy and consequently human resource, and this often contrasted with the stagnation of the Arab world despite its tremendous natural resources, resulting from the latter's addiction to doles and easy money.

It would also split the Meitei society further. Indigenous worship does not always have to equate with tribal status. In any case Sanamahi is still a very important deity of the Hindu Meiteis too. There is something seriously wrong in a community which once prided itself for having evolved into a monarchy politically and economically regressing to the extent of wanting to be called primitive again.

Problems of Heterogeneity

Quite related to the issue is the problem of heterogeneity. It is patently politically incorrect these days to talk of homogeneity when it comes to law making, but is heterogeneity the panacea for all politics – related social discontents? Although there is no denying there is a lot to be had from the heterogeneity proposition, it still needs to be treated sensitively and carefully, for at the end of the other spectrum sits the question of the clash of civilisations. Manipur knows how thin the ice under the issue is as well as, if not more than any other place. Too much of the state's most vexing problems are indeed on account of irreconcilable differences in the perception of what ideal public administration should be amongst the different communities in the state. The contradicting pulls and pushes between the hills and valley; the notions of territory and homeland which have resulted in some of the most bitter frictions amongst communities etc have demonstrated how frustrating the problem of heterogeneity can be. Take just two cases directly related to the question fashioning an administrative model in a heterogeneous situation – the demands for a full-fledged Sadar Hills and Jiribam districts. In the first case, the hurdle is precisely because it is seen as a move to carve out a district for an ethnically different community from another district, Senapati, where this community was a minority.

In the second case, although extremely small in area and population, a separate administrative unit from the adjacent district, Tamenglong, was and is seen as prudent because of disparate land revenue systems followed amongst the tribal and non-tribal populations. While in the tribal areas (mostly hills), the land laws are governed by traditional laws, in the non-tribal areas, the modern land revenue system in which all land is deemed to ultimately belong to the state and citizens pay taxes for its use to the government, is in force. Manipur's experience has been, any attempt to discover a meeting point on this matter has met with a clash of civilisations situation.

How exactly must this issue be tackled, is a question that everybody with a stake in the common and larger good of the state must engage in seriously and urgently. While the answer cannot be to steamroll all differences and make a uniform administrative standard everywhere, there must have to be at least a minimal degree of commonality agreed upon in this onerous project of evolving a governable administrative mechanism from which everybody can benefit. It has to be realised that despite all the differences all humans share plenty in common. Even the consideration of homology will demonstrate this.

The point is, at the basic level, there must have to be a certain degree of standardisation of law and administrative approach. Once a common denominator has been agreed upon, the finer differences that distinguish every man from another, and every community from another, every ethnicity from another, can be explored. If the vegetarian and non-vegetarian man are different in their culinary habits, they both would share many common social ambitions, beginning from the need to have their children educated and fit to face the world, to ensuring their families are free from poverty etc. The job of good laws and good administrative mechanisms hence would be to simultaneously promote the common as well as the heterogeneous elements in a society, especially a multi-ethnic society. Drawing this fine line would not be easy by any chance, but it would have to be drawn.

Biologically Incorrect Sex

Patricia Mukhim*

Is it wrong to be born a woman? Being a woman one cannot but be livid that a biological construct which makes a woman different from a man immediately turns her into an object of sexual desecration. If a group of protesters (I refuse to name the community because public protests are part and parcel of democracy. Ethnic groups are only incidental) went berserk because there was no police bandobast why should a young lady from among the protesters become the target of abuse? What is h er crime? Suddenly, all those years of struggle by women to come into their own and be respected for who they are have come to naught.

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What happened in Beltola, Guwahati on November 24 last was an outrage on womanhood, a horrific indignation that is mind-numbing and nauseating. Those in the seat of power should act instead of indulging in polemics and passing the buck around. The perverts who stripped a young girl and then partied at her expense are actually sick in the head and deserve to be sent to a mental prison if there is one. They deserve exemplary punishment for their barbaric deeds. Enquiries by the CBI or any other agency are only aimed at blurring the issue, delaying the moment of truth and burying the case alive. To call these violators of human dignity 'animals' is an insult to the dumb creatures, because even though they have no ability to think like humans they exhibit a far more sensible behaviour towards the female of the species.

A whole range of intellectual debates have started on Assamnet.org about the Axomiya spirit of assimilation that embraces all who live and breathe on that rarified space called Assam. But this is simply hedging the reality. Why can't we face it? There is in Assam a mainstream which all are not part of. Assimilation of smaller groups, especially those whom we have learnt to treat with disdain because of their profession, is an only an ideal. It has not happened and will not happen without a struggle. Writers and commentators who have a way with words will of course deliver their sermons to an audience that is inherently ignorant about the layering of society in Assam.

Those who live at the fringes of that society know where it hurts. They know how painful it is to be born to a particular class, doing a particular job and having little or no opportunity to move out of that social and economic prototype carved out by the powerful elite. The inherent handicaps, whereby, a whole class of people are enslaved to their situation makes it impossible for them to move out of their predicament. Having taken the rough end of the stick for decades they have now decided to fight back. But this is perceived as audacious by those who believe that (1) Assam can no longer be carved out into three or four states (2) that a community that came to serve in the tea gardens should continue to serve there and be happy with their lot. But all that the tea tribes are asking for is some semblance of positive discrimination, a level playing field of sorts which would better their educational and economic status. But the 'Axomiyas', comprising the upper and middle class Hindu settlers and the blue blooded Ahoms feel that is a tall order.

In a functioning democracy every citizen and group have the right to express their grievances. Like Tarun Gogoi said, "so many groups ranging from the All Assam Students Union to All Bodo Students Union have agitated on different issues but we have never before experienced such inhuman treatment meted out to an agitator, much less a woman". Mr Gogoi needs to unlearn much of his received wisdom on social philosophy and get into the serious business of understanding the politics of class struggle. A fundamental premise on which socialism is built is that human labour is not just another commodity to be bought and sold. And socialism is not dead and cannot be dead as long as there are severe social and economic fissures in society. Moreover, for card carrying Congressmen, socialism is an intrinsic part of the Nehruvian philosophy, never mind its imperfections.

Just two days before the horrendous incident, Assam had successfully hosted the International Tea Festival where connoisseurs of tea from across the globe and the country visited Assam for the historic event. It would have blown their minds had the incident happened during that event. But perhaps the high-level discussions about the huge prospects for upgrading the tea business in Assam, of which the Adivasis are the backbone, must have triggered the protest even as they asked themselves what was in it for them. Indeed, for years together the tea tribes have fought a losing battle. Perched precariously at the lowest rung of the economic ladder, most men drink themselves silly to ease out their frustration. Health care is absent and women and children have a raw deal because even the basic social infrastructure like the anganwadi centres are simply not functioning. Opium addiction also takes away a major chunk of the family earnings. Add to all these the despair of dying from tuberculosis, malaria and dysentery when these diseases are treatable by modern medicines, and you have a perfect recipe for a violent protest. That it did not happen earlier reflects the tolerance level of the poor.

If the tea industry in Assam is given a boost as promised by the Union Ministry for Commerce, how will that translate into better living conditions for those who give their lives to sustain that industry? Is there a rehabilitation package for the tea garden labourers? Or will the boost only lead to what Joseph Stiglitz refers to as an 'ideologically driven policy without the broader notion of human values?'. The Ministry of Commerce needs to spell out a development package for tea workers, if it has one. Pumping money into the industry, without taking into account the human elements that sustain the industry, is not only cruel, but inhuman. Commerce goes way beyond profits, and financial transactions. At the core is the human face without which commerce is a dead subject.

In the next few weeks, Guwahati will witness more protests from various organizations against the sordid incident. But every protest has its life span and protesters reach what is called a 'compassion fatigue'. Acting on impulse and keen to quell what he believes is an aberration, Mr Tarun Gogoi has promised monetary compensation to the young lady who was stripped to the bones and then assaulted. The State needs to do more than pay money for a crime committed, because, money is no balm for the psychological trauma that the girl (I refuse to call her a victim) suffered. These days it is fashionable to pay off all those who encounter brutalities at the hands of state and non-state actors and hope they remain silent. This pay-off policy needs to be reworked. Civil society, however it is defined, needs to be more inclusive and spread out horizontally. One has hardly heard of an Oxomiya organization where members of the tea tribes and other marginalized groups are included. The more polarized ethnic groups are allowed to become the more difficult it would be for democracy to function.

Lived Democracy in India's North East

Democracy embodies some basic elements such as the enjoyment of certain rights which envisage that a citizen lives with dignity, has the right to dissent and takes active part in decision making. All the above requires that there be a rule of law. Laws are enacted by a legislative body which has been empowered to do so by the people through elections held once in five years. But democracy is easier defined than lived. In many states of India's North East, democracy has been bludgeoned beyond recognition.

In Manipur, for instance, laws made by the state are increasingly subverted by militant groups which are too many to list but which are respected depending on the collateral damage they can inflict. While all of them ostensibly aim at checking the growing callousness of the state, in course of time they have themselves imbibed the same characteristics or have tended to be more violent than the state. In fact, the less resistance they face the more fascist they tend to become. Take for instance the ban on all 'Hindi-speaking' channels such as Sony or Star Plus on cable televisions and the ban on Hindi movies and songs across the Manipur valley. While the ban is symbolically a protest against the Indian nation-state which is seen as the tyrant here, it is not a referendum by the people. Militant groups decide what is good or not good for them. This takes away a fundamental element of democracy which is the right to choose a medium of entertainment that people want or prefer.

The media in Manipur is under constant pressure to act within a paradigm dictated by militant groups. With over thirty rebel outfits operating in the valley alone, one can well imagine the tight-rope that media has to walk. A recent directive from the Government prescribing how media should deal with news releases from militant groups had raised the hackles of the press fraternity in Manipur. But, whereas they are relatively free to argue out their case with the Government and to protest what is construed as an attempt to 'tamper with press freedom', that space is not afforded them by militant outfits. Cases of newspaper editors receiving death threats and the ensuing diktat to publicly boycott their newspapers make press freedom a big sham in Manipur. But what puzzles onlookers is the studied silence of civil society groups, including prominent human rights organizations, on any issue that involves the militants.

If you want to see public protests then Manipur is the place to visit. There are activists for any issue under the sun. These protests are, however, all directed against the State as if the state is the only offender. To my mind this greatly undermines the credibility of civil society actors. If the state is an offender in that it has failed to provide for a climate where democracy can be lived and enjoyed equally by all citizens, militants are the real muggers of that democratic ethos. While the state and militants play out their roles, civil society behaves like orthodox Marxists all the time defining paradigms of development not just for their own state but for neighbouring states as well. The attempt by civil society lobbyists is to profile the state as the tyrant from whom people have to be secured. In a democracy the concept of the state is not that of a bull-dozer operating in grand isolation and always going against popular views. So what really is democracy all about?

If we the people have ceased to matter and our views are trashed, then surely there is a need to retrieve democracy from that trash can. But the alternatives to democracy that we have crafted in our region appear to be more dangerous. Many of the movements that emerge to challenge our current democratic aberrations are more authoritarian and transgress the very rule of law that is a defining character of democracy. Now, while democracy itself allows us the liberty to document its manifold failures, the reality is that we have no right to do so with the alternatives structures that have emerged to challenge democracy. Maoism, naxalism and all the insurgent movements of the North East believe in the power of the bullet than in public debates and the rule of law.

In a situation where absolute fear pervades the very air we breathe, is it not a mockery to speak of human rights? Whose rights are we talking about here? Granted that the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), allows security forces to act with impunity, using the law to justify their arbitrary actions. But even security forces cannot transgress the rule of law. There are laws to bring them to book. Now, are we in a position to punish criminals who rule through the barrel of the gun? These dichotomies and our own ambivalence about them and also the double-standards we adopt while articulating our own understanding of democracy, compound the problem instead of reducing the ambiguities.

Upholding democracy is no easy matter. If we are constantly engaging the state we must also muster enough courage to connect with non-state actors either through the media or any other mode of communication. But a methodical analysis of the media in Manipur shows its absolute lack of freedom to articulate the alternative viewpoint. Newspapers are deficient in debates and counterpoints. Militancy has taken away that precious freedom which democracy had enshrined. Ordinary citizens are silenced into acquiescence. Activists and lobbyists are left with a defensiveness that increasingly makes their arguments look shallow and partisan. Even while they attend seminars on democracy, as shrill voices that lynch the already weakened state, they are tacitly silent about the tyranny of gun-toting dissenters (non-state actors). This exposes their lack of conviction in the contemporary discourses on democracy.

A young, accomplished environmental scientist, a Fulbright scholar who I met at the Imphal airport said something remarkable. Perhaps she articulates the voice of the silent majority. Her take was that if AFSPA were removed would that not lead to complete anarchy in Manipur. Now, with AFSPA, if people are afraid of their own shadows what would happen if this law were removed? Perhaps it is this unspoken argument that got Chief Minister Ibobi Singh his second tenure with an overwhelming majority. Going against popular sentiment, the Congress party's election stance was that AFSPA should continue. Without going into the politics of the law termed as 'draconian' and there are political facets to it which need to be enquired into, the common man's perception appear to be that if AFSPA is removed, militants will have a free run of the land and extortion and insecurity would increase ten-fold.

Interestingly, while militants seem to forage from the same corpus as the State Government and it is common knowledge that development funds are shared equitably by both actors, it is the ordinary citizen who is caught in this treacherous undercurrent. If human rights activists spent more time using and promoting others to use the right to information (RTI) it would help bring some transparency in the system. This might better inform us how militants deploy their huge unaccounted income. But does anyone have the temerity to use the RTI? Only free-thinkers might be able to do that. Hence, the urgent need to expand the space for free-thinking, non-partisan activists who can articulate the kind of democracy they want for themselves. As of today, democracy in Manipur is a defeated idea.

Election Commission and its role in Nagaland

Democracy as propounded by the Indian state functions only partially in many states of the North East. Traditional institutions with their archaic systems suited only for the administration of villages with homogenous populations and notorious for their gender biases, continue to be respected by the people for the simple reason that the liberal democratic ethos as enshrined in the Constitution has failed to deliver. Militant groups continue to hand out instant justice through kangaroo courts. In Manipur, those who are caught indulging in corrupt practices are often shot in the legs. People do not protest against such actions because they find the rule of law virtually absent.

Against this peculiar backdrop we have the unique case of Nagaland where even after forty years of statehood, many citizens have never enjoyed the right to vote. Some may wonder why. When a modern system is imposed on a people without their having imbibed its basic philosophy and culture there are bound to be setbacks arising from lack of compatibility between existing practices and modern ideas. Nagaland has sixteen major tribes and a host of sub-tribes. For a Naga, loyalty to his tribe is an unquestioned characteristic. It is the very core of his existence. A person from one tribe cannot represent people of another tribe in the legislative assembly. This unwritten code violates the fundamental spirit of the Indian Constitution.

It is a common occurance that an entire village, inspired by the Goan Bura and his council decides to vote for a particular candidate. Since dissent is equated with contempt to the voice of the village elder and therefore an anathema to the tribal way of life the villagers have no choice but to comply. The concept of universal adult franchise is therefore alien in many parts of Nagaland.

At a recently concluded conference for women organized by the Nagaland State Women's Commission in Kohima, one was surprised to hear even educated, articulate women confessing to the fact that they had never been able to cast their votes because by the time they reached the polling stations their votes had already been cast. Not given to public protestations the women returned home without a demur.

A key objective of the Election Commission of India is to conduct free and fair elections. To further this objective the Commission set in motion the process of photographing every eligible elector to prevent impersonation. Many states had successfully conducted elections using the elector's photo identity card (EPIC) for the last parliamentary election and also for the assembly polls. In states like Meghalaya, the second EPIC round is complete and voters have received their photo identification cards. But no such thing has happened in Nagaland even though the State is scheduled to go for the Assembly polls in February 2008.

It appears that sometime in the late 1990's an attempt was made to photograph electors. A couple of crores of rupees were spent in the process. Officials were bribed by interested contractors to get the contract. A certain photographer parked herself at Mon District for months together and managed to photograph all the electors. But the process appears to have been scuttled for reasons best known to the government of the time. Till date no one speaks about the EPIC. It has become a closed chapter in Nagaland. In any case it is now too late to start the process in time for the next Assembly elections. This would mean that yet again, that a good chunk of women voters would not be able to cast their votes and that tradition will bulldoze its way through.

Ironically, women are also the major campaigners and proxy voters even if the Nagaland legislature has not seen a single woman legislator since its inception. Women are used by political parties to mobilize voters for male candidates. Rano Shaiza, Nagaland's first woman MP says elections in Nagaland are like a circus. Excited to join the fun and games, women voters use nail polish removers to erase what is ostensibly an indelible ink provided by the election commission to identify those who have already voted. Shaiza said thousands of bottles of nail polish removers are sold in a single day. A single woman would cast thirty, forty and even a hundred votes even as the polling officers watch aghast.

There are polling booths where the village headman and his cronies literally stamp all the ballot papers in favour of one candidate and push them into the ballot box. Every one is in collusion. This is democracy as practiced in Nagaland. Sadly women do not even know that they are being used. They are happy to earn a few thousand rupees for their proxy votes they cast.

If the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) is aware of these aberrations, he has done nothing to address them. Not even the circumspect JM Lyngdoh was able to bring electoral accountability in Nagaland. Will the present CEC rise to the occasion and allow electoral politics a fair chance?

Varna-âśrama Dharma and Caste

Ram Swarup*

Varna-âśrama Dharma : Social System

Hindu dhrama has also been described as *varna-âśrama* dharma which represents an important facet of ancient Hindu thinking. The old sages saw that men are broadly divided into four psychological types (*chaturvaṇa*), a very different thing from the caste-system with which it is often confused. They found that these psychological differences were natural and their variety matched the variety of man's needs. Similarly, they thought of man passing through four stage: as a student when he should be acquiring knowledge both vocational and liberal; then as a householder when he enters life, marries, earns and creates wealth for himself and for others and supports all other activities of the society; and at the end he retires from these activities and in the two stages becomes an intense seeker of truth and spends his time in self-reflection. All these stages or *âśramas* were important but in a certain context the householder was declared superior to all for he supported and protected the rest. This ordering involved no iniquity for each man was also all others at different times.

All this thinking and ordering derives from what these sages thought of man. They found that each man is a multiple being: he is physical, mental and spiritual and that all these parts should find fulfillment. From this also came the celebrated four aims (*purushârthas*) of Hindu conception we have already mentioned. Man should work for his physical and economic well-being; he should hand down the torch of life from one generation to another; he should also earn and create wealth; he must also search and follow values and discover the meaning of life. Man was both spirit and body, though he was more of the one at one stage than of the other. The sages followed this natural law and made their recommendations accordingly. The four *âśramas* and the four orders were conceived to fulfil the fourfold nature of man and the four aims of life.

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* Late Ram Swarup was an eminent scholar and thinker.

+ Courtesy : Ram Swarup, *On Hinduism: Reviews and Reflections;* (New Delhi : Voice of India, 2000.

The society had the same needs as its individuals: physical, mental and spiritual. Similarly, its members were endowed with different talents and the results were best when their work, talents and training went together. The *varna-âśrama* dharma was meant to serve this end as best as it could. The society needed creators of wealth and in the Indian scheme they also owned the best part of it; it also needed its warriors, defenders and protectors and also its thinkers, teachers and priests. For what is a society without them? — an easy prey and a bountiful reward for various aggressive forces around. [It is also the class which accustomed invaders and practised imperialists most hate and would like to destroy and discredit — they only care for hewers of wood and drawers of water who are leaderless and whose resistance has been broken.]

In all this ordering of the society, there was no iniquity. Dharma set limit and informed all relations. Its inherent justice can be seen from the fact when we remember that Hindu social order neither knew slavery nor serfdom as a system. It did not live on Imperialist and feudal occupation of other peoples' lands, nor on forced tributes, or the "holy fifth," or jazia. The society produced its wealth by its own members living in self-governing communities. Only that wealth was praise-worthy which was honestly earned and shared (*śuddha-sudhana*).

Now the *âśrama* system hardly exists, and only its memory remains. Varnas were never castes which followed their own laws. But even castes too have lost their old vocational and cultural relevance; they exist, and sometimes even too insistently, mainly politically and they have grown their own vested interests. They are a hot subject and need more mention.

Caste and Communities

No society is a mass; it has always a social configuration. Any developed human society follows the law of differentiation. So did the Hindu society. For better self-articulation, it divided itself in many segments; but in all its diverse expressions, it remained one in spirit. In its caste and community organizations, we see pluralist Hinduism in action. Various people had various talents, various aptitudes and were variously endowed and they all served social needs which were also various. They had also special vocations and special rules and usages (*niyam*), but they all shared deeper truths taught by Hindu dharma. Rules of ethical conduct (*śila*) like harmlessness (*ahimsâ*), truthfulness *(satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), hospitality (*âtithya*), and inner disciplines of the spirit like *śaucha* (internal and external purity), *yama* and *indriya-nigrah* (self-control) were shared truths of all. So were yoga and various other modes of worship. They had shared deities and shared incarnations, and even when they went to different temples, the Gods on the altar were the same. They all remembered their ancestors and performed *śrâddha-karma*. They all offered *tarpana* for Bhishma, the adopted great-great ancestor of all. They all reverenced and worshipped the mother Earth, the rivers, the Sun and the sky. All this constitutes oneness and unity at a deep, psychic level. But deep things are difficult to see and show and we have learnt to be satisfied with the externals. As a result caste has now become Hinduism's badge and flag, its defining mark. It owes to the fact that during its lean years Hinduism lost its right to self-definition. That right passed on to our rulers and they have been defining it for us. There was a time when Hinduism was described in terms of its spiritual wisdom, its Yogas, its philosophy and practices of self-transcendence and self-exceeding, its law of karma and dharma, its mighty and manifold creations; but now it is presented as a system of idolatry, polytheism and castes. For example, once Hinduism was known for its *brahma-vâda*, now its detractors present it as a doctrine of *brâhmaṇa-vâda* and we have lapped up such definitions.

To an external eye, different castes in their more outer circumstances might have looked different, but in their inner attitude and approach, they shared a common life, a common spirit shaped by Hindu spirituality and ethical system. High or low, they all followed as best as they could different attributes of Hindu dharma — often ten have been named by law-givers. Thus in the midst of a great variety of conditions, one could easily see deeper Hindu shaping influences at work. These influences were so deep that they left an impress behind even on those who were converted; they remained closer to their older brothers than to the those whose fold they had to join.

The contribution of Hindu thought in the social field was great indeed. It taught us how to create a society of more or less self-governing communities; it gave us "communitarian democracy," the foundation of a true democracy. In this society, no one was rootless, no body belonged to an anonymous mass; everyone had a niche, a place where he was not a stranger; as a member of a great community, no one could be pushed around and he had the protection of the community. And yet no community was a law unto itself. Each followed the guidance of dharma. Never was there a society so free from coercive state apparatus. Every one belonged, everyone had security, dignity, a vocation. The world needs this system or something like it — and much advanced thinking is veering round to this view — in order to overcome the rootlessness and the atomization that is becoming man's lot under new forces at work.

Hindu dharma taught respect for all classes. It cherished its tapasvins and intelligentia, it cherished its soldiers and administrators, it cherished its producers, traders and artisans and workers. A Vedic verse prays for lustre and light (*rucha*) to reside "in our Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras." Everyone was honoured. In the old system, caste represented the principle of security and continuity — one was employed as soon as one was born; it represented the principle of vocation, of training, of excellence, of pride, of dedication; it represented the principle of co-operation, conciliation, culture, and dignity; it was also a great centre of national power and national expression. It is very much later that caste acquired negative characteristics. It is only a recent phenomenon when under a different ideological conditioning one caste is maligned in the name of another, and caste is being used by powerful vested interests for the fragmentation of the society. Old India had castes but no casteists; new India has casteists but no worthwhile castes. In old India, all people and castes united in defending their society, in defending temples, Brahmins and cows — still worthy objects of protection by a great and compassionate people and civilization.

The caste in India was different from the class or estate in the West. Caste was not economic in concept or organization; it was social and cultural. Different castes produced poets, saints and God-men highly honoured by all. Castes were not also as a rule economically or politically disadvantaged. They had often their own rich; they had their Rajas and chiefs and some of them produced at different times great rulers for the whole country. Traditionally the Brahmins were the poorest (and as a class they remain so even at present) for their philosophy was self-abnegation — anyone who lived a mental life, whether a student, a scholar or a sannyasin, was expected to live in voluntary poverty.

There was a time when the caste system was not static and castes often rose and fell in social status. It was also the time when no caste was "depressed" though there were social differences. Castes became static and depressed during the period of a protracted foreign rule. The old Hindu social system raised the lowest and treated even the Sudras like the Brahmins; the foreign rulers lowered the highest and treated even the Brahmins like the Shudras. Under foreign domination the status of every community became depressed and those on the margin or those who offered persistent resistance became even more depressed. Under these pressures, entirely new classes arose. The sweeper class with its present function is phenomenon of this period. Among them and the tribals, one finds many Rajput gotras.

Thus the caste that old India knew was different from what is said about it. The caste of modern persuasion and understanding is a Western-Christian *construct* of the last few centuries. It was conceived as an aid to foreign rule. But the old stereotype continues to dominate and we have even made it our own. It continues to serve old interests while it has created quite some new ones of its own. Old Imperialist forces trying to stage a comeback are doing their best to keep political casteism alive.

Caste: from Imperial Invention to Trade Union

Rajeev Srinivasan*

It is necessary to begin this essay with a caveat: it is not possible to discuss the term 'caste' objectively in India because of the baggage that has accrued to it over time. There are several reasons for this: first, because of the extreme ideological metastasis of the discourse in India, a number of terms have acquired extraordinary meanings which would startle the dictionary-writer – examples include 'secular', 'minority', 'human rights', all of which mean, in India's peculiar setup, the very opposite of the dictionary meaning.

Thus, the term 'caste' has become demonized and politicized to the extent that the slightest deviation from conventional wisdom is enough to invite, inevitably, accusations of fascism and Nazism. Thus, it is only the brave, or the foolhardy, who venture forth to put across anything other than the received wisdom.

Second, the term 'caste', even if one were to accept the caveats above, is an inadequate word to describe the complex construct of *jati* as it exists in India. In keeping with the strictly Manichean world-view of the imperialist European Christians who created the mythology of caste, they deemed caste to be black-and-white: that is, there are 'good' castes and 'bad' castes. Unfortunately, this Semitic vanity does not quite describe the richness of the concept of *jati,* which does not attempt value judgments about the relative merits of different groups, but accepts that they are all necessary parts of the organic whole.

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Having said this, it is proper to now make – what might be considered – a bold and provocative statement. I assert that caste is actually a good thing. This thought came to me in 1994 when I was debating the very idea of caste for the magazine *Hinduism Today* with a good friend of mine in California. I took the stance that I had been taught in school and by the media: that caste is an unmitigated evil. My poor friend had to take the unpopular opposite stand and claim, rather timorously, that there was **some** good to caste.

Thinking it through over the years, though, I have come to the conclusion that, despite all my thundering and sound and fury, my friend was in fact right: there is **something,** a certain je-ne-sais-quoi about *jati* that has allowed it to survive and thrive for millennia. Indeed, I found it possible to explain my empirical observation in my native Kerala that, far from withering away and disappearing, caste-consciousness was on the rise in that supposedly educated and enlightened place.

Jati has survived because it has value. In the brutal Darwinian marketplace of ideas, *jati* has continued to exist because it is a sound organizing principle. In fact, *jati* and caste-like structures are a hallmark of every human society, because humans are not born equal: there are all endowed differently. *Jati* is merely an explicit recognition of this fact. So is the Communist idea of 'class'; and also this is what is practiced, for instance, in America: there is the *caste* of well-to-do financiers on Wall Street. Very seldom do you find their offspring marrying into the *caste* of janitors. Caste, therefore, simply is, and is neither good nor bad. Casteism, however, is a bad thing: you must not discriminate against people based on caste.

An analogy may be with race. Race, it is universally acknowledged, exists, although it is based on utterly superficial genetic differences. Clearly, people of different races are not so far apart that they cannot successfully inter-breed. Thus, even though race is a superficial characteristic, it exists, and has loomed large over the human consciousness for a very long time. Elaborate mythologies have been built up; for instance, eminent scientists like Nobel-Prize winning physicist William Shockley and geneticist James Watson have gotten into serious trouble for suggesting that blacks are inferior to whites. That is the key: race exists, but racism is not good. It is not appropriate to set one race above the other.

If one were to concede that races may interact as equals, then racism would not be much of an issue. Incidentally, racism is fundamentally economic in character: it so happens that as a result of Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs and Steel*, the lighter-skinned people of European origin managed to subjugate and colonize the darker-skinned people of the tropics. But that does not mean that lighter-skinned people are **destined** to rule over darker-skinned people. Indeed, it is only for a brief period, circa 1700 to 2000, that Europeans have had a technological competitive advantage, and this is disappearing now. Intriguingly, apartheid-era white South Africans, keen on Japanese money, deemed Japanese as 'honorary whites'. As economic power moves to Asia, there will be less and less talk of the allegedly superiority of the white race.

The problem that the imperialists created in India was precisely that they created a hierarchy among the *jatis.* Hitherto, *jatis* had been rather fluid groups whose relative prestige waxed and waned – in a free-market way – based on the economic value of their professions. But the British insisted on two arbitrary things: one, they explicitly assigned *jatis* to precise slots in a *varna* hierarchy; two, they insisted that the *ManuSmrti* was the explicit codification of the hierarchy of castes.

In fact, they were wrong on both counts. *Jatis* were not precisely defined on some scale. There were enough incongruities that this should have been evident to the imperialists when they took their census: for instance, the same *jati* of scribes was considered Brahmin in some places, and Sudras in others. Thus, it was evident that any codification of the hierarchy was fraught with subjectivity; indeed, we face this to this day in the difficulty of assigning a *jati* to a precise spot in the universe of Backward, Other Backward, or Most Backward Castes.

It is indeed laughable, or more likely, a measure of European Christian mischief that they unilaterally chose to anoint the *ManuSmrti* as the absolute lawbook for Hindus. This is patently false. Nobody in all of Hindu history has ever claimed the *ManuSmrti* is anything more than the dyspeptic fantasies of a rather disagreeable medieval person. It has precisely as much divine sanction as innumerable other *Smrtis* written by other personalities, notable and otherwise. But for the British, it fit in with their hypothesis, and therefore they simply declared the *ManuSmrti* to be the truth.

Furthermore, in a very real sense, the European Christians invented caste, just as they created the Third World, as in the damning expose by Mike Davis: *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Nino and the Making of the Third World.* They impoverished many parts of the world, and **created** an artificial shortage of wealth. Before they arrived with their guns – despite a millennium of Mohammedan depredation – India was rich. According to Angus Maddison's magisterial *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective,* India had been for the entire period 0 CE to 1700 CE the richest economy in the world. The Brahmaputra Delta and the Kaveri Delta alone – Bengal and Madras, not coincidentally the first targets of the European Christians – accounted for something close to 20% of world GDP.

A rich India had a highly diversified workforce, because a wealthy society needs its poets, painters, artisans, traders, etc., in addition to agricultural and industrial laborers. By destroying the fabric of this society – for instance by wiping out the weavers of fine textiles in Dacca by imposing crushing tariffs – they instantly turned middle-class, highly skilled labor into unskilled, poverty-stricken itinerant laborers. Clearly the value of the *jati* of weavers would have plummeted. Thus, the imperialists created what have come to be an unemployable underclass.

Furthermore, the imperialists were especially concerned, in security terms, about the small kingdoms around the country and their rulers. They systematically went about undermining their warrior and *samurai jatis,* for fear of uprisings: and they were downgraded to Other Backward Castes. In Kerala, for instance, the Thiyyas/Ezhavas who were the *kalari payat* exponents and the mercenaries hired by local kings were downgraded into an Other Backward Caste; as their martial occupation was dismantled, they too became landless agricultural laborers. This has happened to such an extent that it is likely that most of the small warrior groups have become Other Backward Castes.

Thus, despite all the propaganda, it is neither the case that caste is monstrous; nor is it the case that the so-called lower-castes are looking for handouts. *Jatis* have their own pride and their view of their value in the social system; they are not the truly downtrodden, starving refugees that you see in famine-ridden nations, those *vaastu-hara,* those bereft of all hope.

Jatis are quite coherent in structure in many cases. They have really become nothing more than collective bargaining entities. Since, thanks to misguided Nehruvian Stalinism, the pie has not grown in India, it is important for groups to attempt to grab more than their fair share. That is, *jati* as trade union. Surely this is a positive aspect that even hard-core Communists can relate to.

Therein, interestingly, lies the salvation of the disadvantaged. There is no need for the race to the bottom being indulged in by various vested interests, each group seeking to portray itself as more miserable than the others. In fact, studies show that those *jatis* that pursued politics, thus attempting vote-bank tactics, have consistently underperformed those that took the path to economic self-improvement. In the words of the great philosopher-saint Sri Narayana Guru of Kerala, "educate, and become enlightened; organize, and become strong."

Given their racial memory of having been productive members of society, most *jatis* are capable of raising themselves by their bootstraps. An excellent example is the Gounders of Tirupur near Coimbatore. They have created an enormous textile empire with nothing more than hard work and co-operation, by pooling resources and helping their clan-members. Similarly, the sociologist Joel Kotkin writes in *Tribes* about Gujarati diamond traders. It is strictly the fellow-feeling of *jati* that allows a merchant to entrust a million dollars-worth of uncut diamonds to a fellow *jati*-member on nothing more than a handshake: the fear of ostracism and excommunication from the *jati* is so great that nobody will ever violate the codes of conduct.

As the nation moves away from the shackles of stultifying socialism, those *jatis* that recognize opportunities will prosper. But that is not a purely *laissez-faire* model. There is still a positive role for reservations and affirmative action programs because the resurgence of a group is dependent on dedicated insiders who are role models. These role models have to be developed, and affirmative action clearly helps in giving that leg up to the deserving.

The lessons from affirmative action programs around the world are mixed: some of the recipients did well and improved themselves, while others wallowed in self-pity and rage. For instance, Hispanics in the US (aided partly by strong family ties) have done better than blacks. Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants have done poorly in the UK, while Indians have done much better.

It is the collective, self-interested actions of thousands of people that triggers their ascent. That would be social justice if the State were to desist from interfering. Alas, the actual track record of the Tamil Nadu parties who shout from the rooftops about "social justice" is rather poor. Despite having been in power for decades, they have not been able to create "social justice", and they are still looking for scapegoats. In fact, they could have done much more for their people at large by unshackling their entrepreneurial instincts.

This essay has attempted to demonstrate that the mythology about caste over the last two centuries has been based on economic mischief. Caste is a rather neutral concept. In a free-ish market where the pie is growing, castes provide an important support system for individuals. Far from being the monster that the self-proclaimed 'intelligentsia' in India proclaim it to be, caste is an instrument of social justice and development.

Quarterly Dialogue: Special Numbers

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Caste, Democracy and Reform

Sri Aurobindo*

The Unhindu Spirit of Caste Rigidity

The *Bengalee* reports Srijut Bal Gangadhar Tilak to have made a definite pronouncement on the caste system. The prevailing idea of social inequality is working immense evil, says the Nationalist leader of the Deccan. This pronouncement is only natural from an earnest Hindu and a sincere nationalist like Srijut Tilak. The baser ideas underlying the degenerate perversions of the original caste system, the mental attitude which bases them on a false foundation of caste, pride and arrogance, of a divinely ordained superiority depending on the accident of birth, of a fixed and intolerant inequality, are inconsistent with the supreme teaching, the basic spirit of Hinduism which sees the one invariable and indivisible divinity in every individual being. Nationalism is simply the passionate aspiration for the realization of that Divine Unity in the nation, a unity in which all component individuals, however various and apparently unequal their functions as political, social or economic factors, are yet really and fundamentally one and equal. In the ideal of Nationalism which India will set before the world, there will be essential equality between man and man, between caste and caste, between class and class, all being as Mr.Tilak has pointed out different but equal and united parts of the Virat Purusha as realised in the nation. The insistent preaching of our religion and the work of the Indian Nationalist is to bring home to every one of his countrymen this ideal of their country's religion and philosophy. We are intolerant of autocracy because it is the denial in politics of this essential equality, we object to the modern distortion of the caste system because it is the denial in society of the same essential equality. While we insist on reorganizing the nation into a democratic unity politically, we recognize that the same principle of reorganization ought to and inevitably will assert itself socially; even if, our opponents choose to imagine, we are desirous of confining its working to politics, our attempts will be fruitless, for the principle once realised in politics must inevitably assert itself in society. No monopoly, racial or hereditary, can form part of the Nationalist's scheme of the future, his dream of the day for the advent of which he is striving and struggling.

The caste system was once productive of good, and as a fact has been a necessary phase of human progress through which all the civilisations of the world have had to pass. The autocratic form of Government has similarly had its use in the development of the world's polity, for there was certainly a time when it was the only kind of political organisation that made the preservation of society possible. The Nationalist does not quarrel with the past, but he insists on its transformation, the transformation of individual or class autocracy into the autocracy, self-rule or Swaraj, of the nation and of the fixed, hereditary, anti-democratic caste-organisation into the pliable self-adapting, democratic distribution of function at which socialism aims. In the present absolutism in politics and the present narrow caste-organisation in society he finds a negation of that quality which his religion enjoins. Both must be transformed. The historic problem that the present attitude of Indian nationalism at once brings to the mind, as to how a caste-governed society could co-exist with a democratic religion and philosophy, we do not propose to consider here today. We only point out that Indian Nationalism must by its inherent tendencies move towards the removal of unreasoning and arbitrary distinctions and inequalities. Ah! He will say, this is exactly what we Englishmen have been telling you all these years. You must get rid of your caste before you can have democracy. There is just a little flaw in this advice of the Anglo-Indian monitors, it puts the cart before the horse, and that is the reason why we have always refused to act upon it.

It does not require much expenditure of thought to find out that the only way to rid the human mind of abuses and superstitions is through a transformation of sprit and not merely of machinery. We must educate every Indian, man, woman and child, in the ideals of our religion and philosophy before we can rationally expect our society to reshape itself in the full and perfect sprit of the Vedantic gospel of equality. We dwell on this common sense idea here at the risk of being guilty of repetition. Education on a national scale is an indispensable precondition of our social amelioration. And because such education is impossible except through the aid of state-finance, therefore, even if there were no other reason, the Nationalist must emphasise the immediate need of political freedom without which, Indians cannot obtain the necessary control over their money. So long as we are under an alien bureaucracy, we cannot have the funds needed for the purpose of an adequate national education, and what little education we are given falls far short of the nationalist ideal, being mainly concerned with the fostering of a spirit of sordid contentment with things that be. Apart from the question of the cultivation of those virtues which only come in the wake of liberty, apart from the question of reorganisation of the country, if we were to look into the problem in its purely social aspect, even then we are confronted with the primary need of political emancipation as the condition precedent of further fruitful activity.

The Nationalist has been putting the main stress on the necessity of political freedom almost to the exclusion of the other needs of the nation, not because he is not alive to the vital importance of those needs of economic renovation, of education, of social transformation, but because he knows that in order that his ideal of equality may be brought to its fullest fruition, he must first bring about the political freedom and federation of his country.

(Bande Mataram, September20, 1907)

Caste and Democracy

We fear our correspondent who has criticized on another page the consistency of our views on caste, has hardly taken any trouble to understand the real drift of our articles. His attitude seems to be that we must be either entirely for caste as it at present exists or entirely against the institution and condemn it root and branch in the style of the ordinary unthinking social reformer. Because on the one hand we protested against the ignorant abuse of the institution often indulged in simply because it is different in form and spirit from European institutions, and on the other hand emphasised the perversions of its form and spirit and the necessity of its transformation in the pure spirit of Hinduism, our correspondent imagines that we are inconsistent and guilty of adopting successively two different and incompatible attitudes. Our position is perfectly clear and straightforward. Caste was originally an arrangement for the distribution of functions in society, just as much as class in Europe, but the principle on which the distribution was based in India was peculiar to this country. The civilisation of Europe has always been preponderatingly material and the division of classes was material in its principles and material in its objects, but our civilisation has always been preponderatingly spiritual and moral, and caste division in India had a spiritual object and a spiritual and moral basis. The division of classes in Europe had its root in a distribution of powers and rights and developed and still develops through a struggle of conflicting interests; it aim was merely the organisation of society for its own sake and mainly indeed for its economic convenience. The division of castes in India was conceived as a distribution of duties. A man's caste depended on his *dharma*, his spiritual, moral and practical duties, and his *dharma* depended on his *svabhâva*, his temperament and inborn nature. A Brahmin was a Brahmin not by mere birth, but because he discharged the duty of preserving the spiritual and intellectual elevation of the race, and he had to cultivate the spiritual temperament and acquire the spiritual training which could alone qualify him for task. The Kshatriya was a Kshatriya not merely because he was the son of warriors and princes, but because he discharged the duty of protecting the country and preserving the high courage and manhood of the nation, and he had to cultivate the princely temperament and acquire the strong and lofty Samurai training which alone fitted him for his duties. So it was with the Vaishya whose function was to amass wealth for the race and the Sudra who discharged the humbler duties of service without which the other castes could not perform their share of labour for the common good. This was what we meant when we said that caste was socialistic institution. No doubt there was a gradation of social respect which placed the function of the Brahmin at the summit and the function of the Sudra at the base, but this inequality was accidental, external, *vyavahârika*. Essentially there was, between the devout Brahmin and the devout Sudra, no inequality in the single *virât puruṣa* of which each was a necessary part. Chokha Mela, the Maratha Pariah, became the Guru of Brahmins proud of their caste purity; the Chandala taught Shankaracharya: for the Brahman was revealed in the body of the Pariah and in the Chandala there was the utter presence of Shiva the Almighty. Heredity entered into caste divisions, and in the light of the conclusions of modern knowledge who shall say erroneously? But it entered into it as a subordinate element. For Hindu civilisation being spiritual based its institutions on spiritual and moral foundations and subordinated the material elements and material considerations. Caste therefore was not only an institution which ought to be immune from the cheap second-hand denunciations so long in fashion, but a supreme necessity without which Hindu civilisation could not have developed its distinctive character or worked out its unique mission.

But to recognise this is not debar ourselves from pointing out its later perversions and desiring its transformation. It is the nature of human institutions to degenerate, to lose their vitality, and decay, and the first sign of decay is the loss of flexibility and oblivion of the essential spirit in which they were conceived. The spirit is permanent, the body changes; and a body which refuses to change must die. The spirit expresses itself in many ways while itself remaining essentially the same, but the body must change to suit its changing environments if it wishes to live. There is no doubt that the institution of caste degenerated. It ceased to be determined by spiritual qualifications which, once essential, have now come to be subordinate and even immaterial and is determined by the purely material tests of occupation and birth. By this change it has set against the fundamental tendency of Hinduism which is to insist on the spiritual and subordinate the material and thus lost most of its meaning. The spirit of caste arrogance, exclusiveness and superiority came to dominate it instead of the spirit of duty, and the change weakened the nation and helped to reduce us to our present condition. It is these perversions which we wish to see set right. The institution must transform itself so as to fulfil its essential and permanent object under the changed conditions of modern times. If it refuses to change, it will become a mere social survival and crumble to pieces. If it transforms itself, it will yet play a great part in the fulfillment of civilisation.

Our correspondent accuses us of attempting to corrupt society with the intrusion of the European idea of Socialism. Socialism is not an European idea, it is essentially Asiatic and especially Indian. What is called Socialism in Europe is the old Asiatic attempt to effect a permanent solution of the economic problem of society which will give man leisure and peace to develop undisturbed his higher self. Without Socialism democracy would remain a tendency that never reached its fulfillment, a rule of the masses by a small aristocratic or monied class with the consent and votes of the masses, or a tyranny of the artisan classes over the rest. Socialistic democracy is the only true democracy, for without it we cannot get the equalised and harmonised distribution of functions, each part of the community existing or the good of all and not struggling for its own separate interests, which will give humanity as a whole the necessary conditions in which it can turn its best energies to its higher development. To realise those conditions is also the aim of Hindu civilisation and the original intention of caste. The fulfillment of Hinduism is the fulfillment of the highest tendencies of human civilisation and it must include in its sweep the most vital impulses of modern life. It will include democracy and Socialism also, purifying them, raising them, above the excessive stress on the economic adjustments which are the means, and teaching them to fix their eyes more constantly and clearly on the moral, intellectual and spiritual perfection of mankind which is the end.

(Bande Mataram, September 22, 1907)

Caste and Representation

The policy of the Bureaucracy in the face of the national movement, so far as it is anything more than crude repression, is a policy of makeshifts and dodges, and, though skilful in a way, it shows throughout an extraordinary ignorance of the country they rule. The latest brilliant device is an attempt to reshuffle the constituent elements of Indian politics and sort them out afresh on the basis not only of creed, but of caste. The *Pioneer* has come out with an article in its best style of business-like gravity, in which it settles the basis on which representation should be given to India. For two years of unrest have brought us so far that Anglo-India is awakened to the necessity of giving some kind of representation to the Indians, and petty details of administrative reform, the demand for which was then considered as much a crying for the moon as the cry for Swaraj nowadays, are fast coming into the range of "practical politics". Great are the virtues of unrest! Of course it is only representation and not representative government which Anglo-India is bending itself to think within the range of possibility; for government means control and control is the last thing which they will consent to yield to us. When Viceroys and Law Members talk of giving us a larger share in the government of our country, they mean of course not control but what they call a voice, and they will take good care that this voice shall be *vox et praeterea nihil*, a voice and nothing more. But even a voice may be a serious inconvenience to an absolute government and pains are therefore to be taken to substitute an echo for a voice, an echo of bureaucratic whisperings for the living utterance of a nation. In the representative institutions which the bureaucracy are likely to give us, it is the drone of many notables and the mechanical squeaking of officially manipulated puppets that we shall hear, and this, the world will be told, is the voice of the Indian people.

But Anglo-Indian statesmanship will not rest satisfied with tuning the eneffective voice with which they desire to delude our aspirations, to the character of a flat and foolish echo; they will farther make every arrangement to turn it into a source of fresh weakness to the growing nationality instead of a source of strength. They began of course long ago, the attempt to make capital of the religious diversities of Indian society and recently the policy of setting the Mahomedans as a counterpoise to the Hindus has been openly adopted. In the new Legislative Councils the Mahomedans are to have representation not as children of the soil, an integral portion of one Indian people, but as a politically distinct and hostile interest which will, it is hoped, outweigh or at least nullify the Hindus. The bureaucratic Machiavels have not realised that the conditions of the new struggle which has begun, are of so different a kind from any yet known in British India that the Mahomedans cannot be turned into an effective tool in the hands of the bureaucracy without becoming at the same time a danger to the artisan of discord who uses them. For the field of the struggle is not nowadays in Simla or on the floor of the House of Commons or on any lists where outside opinion can have a decisive or even a material influence. It is not a voice which they have to set against a voice or a show which they have to outface with a better show, but a force which they will have to call into being to oppose a force. The Hindus have become self-conscious, they have heard a voice that cries to them, "Arise from the dead, live and follow me," and they are irresistibly growing into a living and powerful political force. Unless the Mahomedans can be built up also into a self-conscious, living and powerful force, their assistance to the rulers will be a mere handful of dust in the balance. But the moment they become a living and self-conscious power the doom of bureaucracy will be sealed. For no self-conscious community aware of its strength and separate life will consent to go on pulling chestnuts out of the fire for Anglo-Indian Machiavel. Even if they do not coalesce with the Hindus, they will certainly demand a share of the power which they maintain. Not in that direction lies any permanent hope of salvation for the absolute power of the bureaucracy. Perhaps the more thinking part of Anglo-India perceives this truth, hence the desire to find additional points of support and other principles of discord by which Indian Nationality can be hopelessly divided and cut to pieces in the making.

Of course the *Pioneer* does not avow the real object of this scheme for creating and perpetuating as political entities divisions which every healthful political organism progresses by subordinating and discharging of all political significance; but it is obvious enough. If it were possible for the bureaucracy to turn the social divisions of the community into political divisions, there could be no more fatal instrument of political disorganisation, and just as a natural indigenous rule finds its safety in better political organisation, so an unnatural alien rule finds its safety in disorganisation of what it preys upon. If it can, it destroys all centres of political organisation except itself; otherwise it tries to create unnatural centres whose action will hamper and distract the organic growth. Caste with the proper safeguards is an admirable means of social organisation and conservation, but it has not and should not be allowed to have any political meaning. In India with the exception of Maharashtra it has had no political meaning at all. In the old times it was different. All the executive power and functions of war and politics were in the hands of the Kshatriyas for the good reasons that the whole work of war and protection of the country from internal and external disorder was assigned by Society to them, and classes which did not give of their blood to preserve the peace and freedom of their country could not claim a direct control of administration. The Brahmin legislated, but legislation was then a religious function which implied no political power or position, and the people at large exercised only an indirect control by the pressure of a public opinion which no ruler could afford to neglect. Afterwards when Chandragupta and Asoka had created the tradition of a powerful absolutism with a strong bureaucratic organisation to support it, things changed, but not in the direction of a polity based on caste. On the contrary all classes, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Sudra could and did rise to any position of political power, even the throne itself, and except in Rajasthan where the Kshatriya ideals and institutions were preserved, caste came to count less rather than more in politics as time went on. All the great nation-builders have ignored caste as a political factor and it was only when the national spirit of the Marathas declined after Panipat that a cleavage on the lines of caste took place which is still a slight danger to Nationalism in the South. It is curious to find the British rulers who have done their best to undermine caste as a social institution now dreaming of perpetuating and using it as a political instrument. We do not think they will make much by this move. The centripetal impulse in Hindu society is already too strong and with most of us political division by castes is too foreign to our habits of thought to take root. The very idea of making a constituency of Bengal Kayasthas or Bengal Brahmins is absurd. Only where certain classes are much depressed and submerged a temporary strife may be created, but the onward sweep of the national movement, profoundly democratic as it is, will lift these classes to a nobler function in society and give them prizes which a Government post or title cannot hope to rival. If we listened to our Loyalists and continued to depend on alien favours and look on them as the crown of our political life, then indeed discord might be sown and castes learn to view themselves as distinct and hostile political interests, but against the force of the National movement such devices will array themselves in vain; its democratic and unifying spirit will make light of all such feeble attempts to divide.

(Bande Mataram, December 6, 1907)

The "Reformer" on Moderation

The *Indian Social Reformer* has discovered that the moderate programme needs revision. Moderation is defined by this authority as a desire to preserve the British Raj until social reform has accomplished itself, for the reason that an indigenous Government is not likely to favour social reform so much as the present rulers do. The Reformer would therefore like the Moderate programme to be modified in order to tally with its own definition of moderation. We presume that, in its view, the Congress instead of demanding Legislative Councils should ask for the forcible marriage of Hindu widows; instead of the separation of the judicial and executive, the separation of reformed wives from unreformed husbands or vice versa; instead of the repeal of the Arms Act, the abolition of the Hindu religion. This introduction of social details into a political programme is a fad of a few enthusiasts and is contrary to all reason. The alteration of the social system to suit present needs is a matter for the general sense of the community and the efforts of individuals. To mix it up with politics in which men of all religious views and various social opinions can join is to confuse issues hopelessly. It is not true that by removing the defects of our social structure we shall automatically become a nation and fit for freedom. If it were so, Burma would be a free nation at present. Nor can we believe that the present system is favourable to social reconstruction or that self-government would be fatal to it. The reverse is the case. Of course, if social reform means the destruction of everything old or Hindu because it is old or Hindu, the continuance of the present political and mental dependence on England and English ideals is much to be desired by the social reformers; for it is gradually destroying all that was good as well as much that was defective in the old society. With the programme of becoming a nation by denationalisation we have no sympathy. But if a healthy social development be aimed at, it is more likely to occur in a free India when the national needs will bring about a natural evolution. Society is not an artificial manufacture to be moulded and remodelled at will, but a growth. If it is to be healthy and strong it must have healthy surroundings and a free atmosphere.

(Bande Mataram, May 1, 1907)

Knowing no death let the musician proclaim
aloud the Supreme Resort,
Secreted in the heart-cave.
In Him the multiform resolves into uniform.
He, our father, progenitor, borther, knows all
homes and beings,
The sole nomenclator of the gods.
To Him enquiringly resort all beings.

Atharva Veda 2. 1. 2, 1, 3.

The Caste: A General Appraisal

B.B. Kumar*

Indian society consists of numerous endogamous hereditary units, called 'jati' in the Indian languages, and 'caste' in English. The membership of the unit is acquired by birth. The word 'j*ati*' is derived from 'j*an*' (to be born; jayate, Present tense[1]). It denoted the one, in whom (feminine) the person is born (Sanskriti, *Jati ; jayate yasyam iti*[2]; *yasyam,* locative of feminine base *'ya'* of the pronoun *'yad'*, who, which;[3]). The term 'jati' is widely used in almost all the languages of India, including the tribal languages.[4] The word 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese word 'casts' (unmixed race; breed, race, strain; from casto, pure; Latin, castus, pure).[5] It is interesting to note that the word 'jati' does not have the racial meaning, which the Portuguese word has. The Sanskrit word also meant 'birth; g*otra* and the four varnas, namely, Brahmana/Kshatriya/ Vaishya/ and the Shudra.[6] The four varnas gradually split into numerous units known as jati or caste. Although caste is a special feature of the Hindu society, but Muslims,[7] Christians[8] and other[9] religious communities in India are also not free from the same. The elements of caste are also found outside India in a very large area.[10]

The caste remained the synonym of varna in India for thousands of years. This remained so up to the advent of Al-Beruni.[11] The rules of marriage and endogamy operated in the over all v*arna* frame.[12] The rules of purity and pollution were simple and operated only within the varna frame; the persons of all varnas used to take meal at one place forming four groups up to the time of Al-Beruni.[13] It was taboo to eat the leavings of one another,[14] as is the case today. Thus, splitting of the varnas into numerous castes and sub castes, extension of the rules of endogamy and that of the commensality and the rigidity in the purity and pollution rules seem to be later developments which took place after the arrival of Muslims in India. The people of all the varnas lived together in the towns and villages in identical houses and they used to freely mix up at the time of Al-Beruni.[15] The society used to have the persons out of the varma frame also and they were called[16] *antyaja*.

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Multiplicity of castes and to some extent the local variations in the beliefs and usages, which are but natural for a vast country like India, baffle a casual observer. But a keen unprejudiced observer does not fail to see the broad, fundamental principles and the framework under which they operate and provide an unified picture. Dubois, though not an unprejudiced person, has mentioned about this aspect. He wrote:

"With regard to caste usages, I must warn my readers that my researches were confined to the provinces south of the Krishna river, where I passed most of the time that I was in India. I can not say whether these usages are same to the north of that river and in Hindustan proper; but if any differences there be it is probable that they exist only in form. There is no place in India which does not possess certain customs and practices of its own, and it would be impossible to give descriptions of them all. Fundamentally, however, caste constitutions are the same everywhere. Further more, however, many the shades of difference between the various castes, however diversified the customs that control them, only slight differences exist between the various forms of religious belief. Indeed, the religion of Hindus may be said to form a common centre for the numerous elements, which constitute Hinduism in its widest sense. Moreover there is a certain general uniformity of rule and practice in everyday social matters, which compels one to look upon the different masses of the population as belonging in reality to one big family."[17]

Indian castes form the integrated part of a cohesive system. The system, as per the Puranas and the epics operated throughout the world consisting of the seven *dwipas* inhabited by different races.[18] It included all the races of India within its operational frame.[19] It specifically included the communities of the Indian fringe and beyond, such as, the Shakas, Yavanas and the Kiratas.[20] The colonial scholars and their followers of India origin have often, neglected these aspects. They present a highly localized and racist interpretation of caste aimed at the social divide in India.

One of the salient features of the caste system is the common hereditary occupation of the members of any caste. This aspect, as well as the endogamy practiced by the caste men attracted the attention of Megasthenes in the third century B.C. He wrote, "It is not permitted to contract marriage with a person of another caste, nor to change from one profession or trade to another, nor for the same person to undertake more than one, except he is of the caste of philosophers."[21]

These features of the caste system attracted the attention of others also. However, the observation of Megasthenes does not seem to be authentic so for as the question of hereditary profession is concerned, None of the four varnas—the Brahmanas,[22] the Kshatriyas,[23] the Vaishyas,[24] and the Shudras[25]—were denied the choice of professions other than those ordained by the *Shastras/Sastras*. Of course, the choice was always limited.

The Hindu society consists of the four varnas and the outcastes. The Vedas do not recognise mixed castes. The present day society also does not. The *Smritis/smrtis*, and the *Puranas/puranas,* however, do it. The term 'varna is derived from Sanskrit root *'varni'* (to describe). The meaning of the term is also colour. The four varnas are interdependent. They are, (i) the priests, poets and the scholars called Brahmans, (ii) the warriors and the rulers called the Kshtriyas, (iii) the merchants, agriculturists and the husbandmen called the Vaishyas, and (iv) the artisans, wage-earners and the servants called the Shudras. The first three categories undergo initiation ceremony, and are called d*wija*. i.e. twice born. They were allowed to wear the sacred thread (*Yajnopavita*) and are allowed to study the Vedas and perform the y*ajnas*. In reality, not even one out of a lakh of them see the Vedas and a microscopic minority of them perform the yajnas. Thus, we find a fossilised custom today in the form of the initiation ceremony and the sacred thread wearing.

The varna of a person was decided in ancient days by his work and the quality. Thus, it was a functional and a behavioural category. Later on the status-fossilization took place and the varna started to be decided by the birth only. Earlier, the persons who failed to perform their ordained duties were subjected to degradation. Such persons were called 'Vratya/*Vratya*'[26] or '*Vrishala*/*Vrsala*'. and were later on grouped with the Shudras.[27] Thus, there was change in the status for a large percentage of the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas due to the reason given above, and they were included in the Shudra category of today. Such persons have the living tradition of their former varna status in the memory of their community. They wanted the same to be duly recorded during the caste enumeration by the Indian Census their valid attempts were erroneously termed as the attempts of status improvement, This gave birth to the myth of Sanskritization. It may be mentioned here that our sciptures recognize the fluidity in the varna frame by mentioning the existence of the Shudra born of the Brahmana parents (*Brahmana-janma Shudra*) and the Brahmana of the Shudra parentage (*Shudra-janma Brahmana*).[28]

As mentioned above, the caste attracted the attention of the foreigners such as Megasthenes and Al-Beruni, from the very beginning. The foreigners' interest in caste was renewed after the British rule in India, especially after the start of the Census Operations in India by the end of the 19th century. The initial studies on caste were mostly impressionist studies based on scant data and over-generalizations. Sir Henry Maine made one of the earliest remarks on the system in 1871. He wrote:

"I am aware that the popular impression...is that Indian society is divided, so to speak, into a number of horizontal strata, each representing a caste. This is an entire mistake...The true view of India is that, as a whole, it is divided into a vast number of independent, self-acting, organised social groups..."[29]

Needless to say that both the views mentioned above are wrong. The society is not divided into as many horizontal strata as many castes are there.[30] It is also not true that the self-acting, organised social groups are independent. The interdependence of the castes[31] is a well-known phenomenon. The system based on the principles of division of labour manifests itself into contractual and Jajmani/*Jajamani* relationships.[32]

The study of caste during last one and a quarter century was done in massive scale and in many directions. The approach and the emphasis differed. The study of caste as a class was also made and a social theory was developed ignoring its inaccuracies.[33] Massive attempts were made and vast literature was produced to provide the racist interpretation of caste.[34] The functional aspect was emphasized, likewise by many others.[35] Many western and Indian writers indulged in the indiscriminate use of the caste to refer to an established social order and to a situation fostering social injustice.[36] Some writers over-emphasised the hierarchical aspect of the caste[37] and yet some did the same with the caste linkages of the purity and the pollution.[38] The interest of the empire was supreme in the minds of a section of the colonial functionaries of the British government in India and they accordingly misdirected caste studies. The paid agents of the empire distorted the traditions and misinterpreted the caste system. The application of European colonial experiences in Africa, America and elsewhere,[41] and of their prejudices of race and colour in Indian scenario[42], coupled with the biases of the writers brought highly undesirable results. The frame of reference in the study of caste has frequently been confused.[43] This still continues to be so in large number of cases. Thus, the caste studies in India, though massive, are not reliable.

The Indian scholars of caste heavily rely on the translations[44] of Sanskrit texts and the writings of the western scholars and outdated monographs on castes and tribes written in the 18th and the early part of the 19th century.[45] Most of the writers of the monographs had scant regard for the traditions of the various castes and tribes about their own communities; they relied heavily on hearsay and the opinions of the uninformed biased persons.[46]

The varna is often referred for determining the status of a caste. The status of a caste under the Brahman varna is considered to be higher than that under the other ones. The situation is not the same if there are more than one castes under the same varna claiming superiority over each other. Often a caste is found to have superior status in one area and the inferior status at a place elsewhere.[47] Thus, there are other factors also which determine the status of a caste, which include the adherence of the higher social values and norms, including the socially preferred food habits by the community concern,[48] the dominance of a particular caste in the region[49] and the historic roles played by the referred community.[50] The varnas are recognised as categories by the scriptures. The same is not true with majority of the castes.

A person born in any varna was able to become a Rishi/Rsi and achieve Brahmanhood. We had Vedic Rishis born in all the varnas Thus the religion of the Indians should not be labeled as Brahmanhood. All the four varnas were advised to read the Puranas, *Itihasas* (history), Mahabharata, Ramayana[51], etc. The study of the Vedas, which was a very rigorous and time consuming act, was denied to the fourth varna.[52] One had to study it for a very long period remaining celibate even up to the age of forty-eight years.[53] Faulty pronunciation of the Vedic *mantras* was considered to be a sinful act and therefore avoided.[54] The same was not the case with other scriptures and their study was considered to be a meritorious act.[55] The pilgrimage,[56] taking holy baths at the sacred places[57] and other similar acts continued to be performed by all the varnas.

Bhakti did not require the rigours of the rituals and therefore, it was a popular way of worship from a very ancient time.[58] The worship of Shiva/Siva and Shakti/Sakti did not prohibit eating meat and the consumption of wine.[59] Therefore, Shaivism, Shaktism and Tantric Hinduism was more popular wherever the rigours of vegetarianism and prohibition of wine were not liked.[60] In spite of the above, we have people pursuing all the sects, in every corner of India within every castes[61] within millions of families. All Hindus worship Vishnu/Visnu, Shiva, Shakti and all other gods and goddesses. A person of any caste, initiated into Vaishnavism, takes only the vegetarian food.[62] The non-vegetarian food is often cooked separately in a vegetarian family. Thus, purity and pollution is not a community affair, but a personal affair in this case. The Brahmans of Bengal[63] Assam,[64] Manipur,[65] Mithila[66] and Konkan[67] relish fish.

The Hindus practise caste endogamy and the gotra exogamy.[68] Some Brahmans also practise *pravara* exogamy.[69] On the other hand, some communities belonging exclusively to the Kashyap gotra practise Gotra endogamy and avoid marriage up to certain degrees of kinship.[70] As the generation gap between the gotra and the pravara is not much[71], therefore, the two may be categorised together and thus the exogamy practised by the Hindus comes under only two categories. The Hindus consider marriage within the gotra or within the prohibited degree of kinship as an act of incest.[72] The parents of a bride have the natural tendency to marry their daughter in a family of superior status. They think it below their prestige if the daughter is married in a family of inferior status. In many cases, the clans, or the exogamous sections of the caste, are graded superior and inferior.[73] In that case, the daughter is married in the superior clan/section.[74] This kind of hypergamous marriage is prevalent among many communities, such as among the Rajput,[75] Nayars,[76] Marathas[77] and the Maithil Brahmanas.[78] Kulinism among some sections of the Brahmanas and some other castes of Bengal was also the hypergamous practice.[79] The hypergamy, where a bride is married among the higher ranking caste, the caste exogamy takes place and is tolerated.[80] The reverse kind of exogamy was not preferred.[81] The mixed castes, mentioned in the Smritis/*Smrtis* and the Puranas originated from such practice only.[82]

The castes regulate their own affairs through their respective caste councils, called panchayats.[83] Mostly the caste councils function at the village level. Some have inter-village or regional caste councils also.[84] The communities, with thinly scattered population in a large cluster of villages, either call the caste representatives from different villages to settle their intra-caste disputes of serious nature or refer the case for settlement to the caste council of the dominant community of the village.[85] The Brahmanas, usually, call the informal meeting of the senior caste-men to settle their disputes. Inter-caste disputes are settled by the village council and not by the caste council.[86]

The caste councils, usually, decide the cases of the violation of the norms and usages, rape, incest, violation of the rules of caste endogamy and clan exogamy, property disputes, theft, divorce, violation of the rituals, taking tabooed meal, etc.[87] The punishments include chastising, monetary fine, and asking the defaulter to give community feast. in extreme cases, social boycott or the ex-communication from the community was resorted to.[88]

The *jati* or *biradari panchayats*, as they are called, are the only controlling agencies of the communities. The norms and usages have, of ten, the all-India framework with slight variations. The purity and the pollution aspect of the Caste system need to be studied at two levels. At one level, the rules of commensality applied. All the communities were subjected to such rules. Most of the communities took water and *pakka* food from each other. The people did not, usually accept *Kachcha* food, even from the house of a Brahman. At the other level, untouchability operated and a section of the Hindu society suffered from the social disability.

Many castes, in reality, are not the castes, but the caste clusters. The endogamous groups following different professions are of ten clubbed together and termed as single caste. This violates the basic concept of caste as an endogamous social unit with its own profession. There are numerous communities where we find the clustering of castes. The Newars of Sikkim and Nepal have six tiers of occupational sub-groups headed by Deva Brahmanas.[89] Parbatiya Brahmans have replaced Deva Brahmans in Nepal and Sikkim, as priests now a days.[90] Such things have happened many times in almost every part of the country where the status of the castes of a particular area have been lowered simultaneously. Such downward mobility of castes followed by their fusion into a single caste cluster have resulted into the disappearance of all the varnas except the Shudra varna. This happened in every part of the country in the past.

The case of Chhattarkhai caste of Orissa, although of identical nature, is slightly different. Some people lost their caste for eating in relief-kitchens (*chhattras)* during 1866 famines. They formed Chhattarkhai caste after their social degradation. They have two endogamous sub-castes. The upper sub-caste consists of Brahmanas, Karans, Khandaits, and Gop-Goalas,[91] The other castes formed the lower sub-caste.[92] This is the case of simultaneous downgrading and fusion of castes.

The downgrading of castes and the individuals in the varna frame used to take place due to behavioural reasons.[93] The *Vratyas* of the Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vaishya origin attained the status of Shudras.[94] Many Kshatriyas became Shudras due to the fear of Parasurama[95] and Muslims,[96] especially Aurangzeb.

We know of the cases, when the persons indulging in the incestuous relationship or marrying within their own *thars* were liable to be sold as slaves and formed the Kamara caste.[97] The Kamaras freed by their masters on the payment of their manumission fee formed the Gharti caste. It had the persons born in any caste as its members.[98]

In many cases, such as in the case of Lohar caste, a heterogeneous aggregate is formed by the fusion of ethnic elements from diverse sources following the common profession to form the single caste.99 Kanaujia, Magahiya, Birbhumia, Govidpuria and many other sections among the Lohars indicate towards the places from which they originated or came from[100] On the other hand, Munda, Lohars, Bagdi Lohars, Manjhi Turiyas, etc. point towards the tribes and the castes from whom they were recruited.[101]

The downward mobility of the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas and their merger into fourth varna resulted into the swelling of its ranks. Shudra varna also became a complex one duo to that reason. As a consequence, the Shudra varna was divided into different categories. In Bengal, the Shudras are classified into Satsudra, Jalacharaniya Shudra, Jalabyabaharya Shudra and the Asprishya Shudra.[102] In Tamil Nadu, they are divided into the left hand and the 'right hand' categories.[103]

The division of labour was the basis of the varna system. The society had only four endogamous categories. The numerous artisan groups did not form separate endogamous castes at that early period and therefore, the varna did not split into the numerous castes. However, at the later stage, especially after the Turk invasion, the marriage at the distant places to the unknown persons was discouraged. The same thing happened with the groups pursuing different callings and the professions. This resulted into the split of varnas into numerous castes. The process of fission did not stop at this stage and the developing specializations resulted into the formation of endogamous sub-castes. As for example, the gardener caste (Mali) split into endogamous Phul

Mali, Kacha Mali, Jire Mali and Haldo Mali sub-castes who produce flowers, cotton braid, cumin seeds (jire) ad turmeric (halad or haldi) respectively.[104]

Disabilities

One of the features of the caste system, which needs special mention, is the civil and the religious disabilities suffered by a section of society. Such disabilities were very severe in the Deep South.[105]a That was not so in Assam. The severity was far less even in the north. The nation fought against such disabilities under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The response of society was positive. The untouchability was eradicated. The political elite of this country talked of the eradication of caste. Very soon, they learnt the political use of the caste and thereafter the process was reversed. The caste is also used as a protective mechanism to save the most corrupt among the power elites.

The scriptural perception of caste supports the traditional perception of the downward mobility of the castes in the overall varna frame. Different castes communicated their status in the varna frame, as they knew from the tradition and their collective memory, when the community was asked to do so by the Census Organization during the British period. It was not only the castes of non-Brahmana varnas who suffered due to the crisis of identity due to the duality of the pre-and post degradation status, but even the castes under the Brahmana varna. There were many Brahmana castes also who were not given due recognition. Sir Athelstane Baines has written about them, thus :

"In every linguistic group, moreover, there are certain classes which though called Brahmanas by the public, and enlisted to perform some of the ceremonial functions of the Brahman, are either not recognized by other Brahmans, or are relegated by them to a degraded position, inferior, in reality, to that to which many of the non-Brahmana castes are admitted."[105A]

It may be pointed out that the priestly Brahmans or their relatives pursuing other professions do not face such crisis of identity. It is also relevant to note in this connection that majority of the Brahmans do not follow the profession ordained by the scriptures and do not deserve to be called 'Brahmanas' according to the prescriptions of Manu. It was only the status fossilization which prevented them from sliding down to the status of the Shudras, as a vast majority of the Brahmans, including the priests have not seen the Vedas in their life-time and therefore, the question of reading and teaching the Vedas by them does not arise.[106] In this connection, it must be kept in mind that priestly profession was always pursued by, comparatively, a small percentage of the Brahmans and it was looked down upon with disfavour by the most deserving ones.[107]

The Brahmanas perform all sorts of jobs including that of the agricultural labour and tilling the soil.[108] The persons of their own varna challenge the Brahman status of a section of them. Therefore, the so-called status improvement efforts[109] are not confined to any particular section of the society. Here, it needs mention that the Hindus do not follow Brahmana model, Kshatriya model, Vaishya model and the Shudra model.[110] They follow the varna model only.

Even if we ignore the fact that the 'Sanskritizstion' is a misnomer, like other hypotheses framed on that line, such as the Pali-ization,[111] it is difficult to agree with Shrinivas that a "low" Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, rituals, ideology, and way or life in the direction of a high and frequently, "twice-born" caste.[112] First, they try to change in the direction prescribed by the scriptures and the twice-born also follow the same. Second, many so-called low castes are more puritan than the Brahmans of many regions of India. Third, many Brahman castes are lagging behind some dominant non-Brahman castes in the processes of Sanskritizatin and westernization. The concept of Sanskritization, therefore, needs re-examination.

The caste system had both the positive and negative aspects. The system had, mainly, the behavioral, social and moral basis. The elements of co-operation, interdependence and the cohesion made its functioning smooth. These aspects were often ignored by the colonial writers. There is an urgent need, therefore, to study the caste system with positive frame of mind and with objectivity. We need to develop the macro perception of caste in India basing on the micro studies made by various foreign and Indian writers. The study may help us in understanding the distortions and mis-interpretations about the Indian society, especially, the caste system, and the ill motives and biases of the colonial scholars.[113]

India has numerous castes and tribes. But, these castes and tribes function under a more of less uniform frame. The social continuum in India, incorporating the Caste-Tribe continuum, and the mobility from caste to tribe and vice-versa is often not studied properly. An in-depth objective study is necessary.[114]

Reference

1. Kale, M.R., *A Higher Sanskrit Grammar*, p.45.
2. *Halayudh Kosh*, p. 315.
3. Kale, op. cit., p. 92.
4. Kumar, B.b., *Tribal Societies of India*, P. 2.
5. Wyld, Henri Cecil, *Universal English Dictionary*, p. 158.
6. *Halayudh Kosh*, P. 92.
7. Bhatty, Zarina, *Social Stratification among Muslims in India*, In M.N. Srinivasa's *'Caste, Its Twentieth Century Avatar'*, pp. 244-62
8. Tharamangalam, J., *Caste among Christians in India*, in M.N. Srinivas's op. cit., pp. 263-91.
9. Sikhs and Jews have also the castes among them.
10. Ghurye, *Elements of Caste Outside India*, in '*Cast and Race in India*, pp. 141-61.'
11. Al-Beruni, *India* (Hindi version), p. 47.
12. *Manu-Smriti*,3.12.14.
13. Al-Beruni, op. cit., p. 49
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid, p. 48.
16. Ibid.
17. Dubois, *Hindu Mannes, Customs and Ceremonies*, pp. 10-11
18. *Shri Vishnu Puran*, II.4.17, 30.31, 38.39, 53, 69.
19. *Manusmriti*. X. 4-5: 44-45.
20. *Mahabharat Sabha*. 52.13-17: Sabha. 38.
21. Quoted by Ghurye, op. cit., p.2
22. *Manusmriti*. X.81.86.
23. *Manusmriti*. X.95.
24. *Manusmriti*. X.98.
25. *Manusmriti*. X.99-100.
26. Ibid, X.43.
27. Ibia, X.44-45.
28. *Mahabharat Van*. 216.13-14.
29. Maine, Sir Henry, *Village Communioties in the East and West*, Pp.56-57; quoted in the Encyclopedia Americana, (1964 edition), vol. 6; p. 1.
30. Except for the upper most and lower most section of the Hindu society, there are large number of castes bracketed together. It is wrong to say that every caste forms a strata.
31. The castes with different economic activities and the Jamani system makes the society interdependent.
32. Mandelbaum, David G., *Society in India*, pp. 161-62.
33. Melvin M. Tumin's '*Caste in a Peasant Society*' uses caste as a class.
34. The works of Max Mueuller and Risley have set the tradition of the racist interpretation of Indian Society.

35. Kindly see the chapter on *'The Colonial Theories of Caste.*
36. Kindly see J.H. Hutton's *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and the Origin.*
37. Dumount over-emphasised this aspect.
38. India was successful in eradication of untouchability. This aspect is neglected even to-day by the Indian scholars and the aspects of purity and pollution continues to get prominence in there studies and the creative writings.
39. The state sponsored monographic micro studies of the castes and tribes aimed at projecting Indian society as a dis-organised entity.
40. Max Muller was paid for preparing a distorted version of Rigveda to facilitate proselytization of India. He was responsible for giving racial meaning to many vedic words, such as the 'Arya', 'Sasya',
41. The presented the so called Aryan aggressors in their own role in deplorable empire making activities in Africa, America Australia and elsewhere. This was not the Indian experience.
42. The Europeans were had tremendous errogance about their white colour and the race. They assumed so called 'Aryans' also to the their replica. The colonial theories of caste are full of the assumptions that the so called Aryans had these complexes which played due role in the origin and development of the Caste System.
43. *Encyclopedia Americana,* op. cit., p. 1.
44. The foreign and Indian writers on caste never use the original Sanskrit Texts. They voluminously quote from the translations of Max Muller, Wilson, etc. and from the books like books like 'Vedic Indrex'.
45. It is interesting to go through the books written by the Indian writers and the publications of the Government agencies and to find massive references from the publications which are as old as a century or more and liberal quotes and references from Sherring, Thruston, Ibbetson, Crooke, Metcafe, Russel and Hiralal, Wiliam, Enthoven, Lyall, Hutton, Gait, Buchanan, Opert, Carlieyle, etc. Their views are often accepted without any adverse comments of these writers. These have only the historical importance.
46. The study of the scriptures declined during the Muslim rule and the trend continued during the British rule. The people become became shortsighted. The persons whom these writers selected as the informants seem to have scant knowledge about the other caste. They thought others except those belonging to the own caste to be the degraded ones to be. We find the observations of the western writers about various communities mostly impressionist.
47. Mandelbaum, op. cit., p. 23.
48. Mayer, Adrian C., *Some hierarchical aspects of caste;* Southwestern Journal of Anthropology (1956), 12.117—144.

49. Shrinivas, M.N., *The Social system of Kysore village;* in *Village India*, N. Marriott. p. 25.
50. Dubois, op. cit. p. 23.
51. The advice to read Mahabharat and the merit acquired by reading the same is given at the end of every Parva. The last chapter of the Ramayan of Valmiki also exhorts one to read the same and points out the merits acquired by reading the same.
52. Manu. IV. 99;
53. Al-Beruni. op. cit., pp. 228-29; Manu. III.1.
54. Manu. IV. 99;
55. Maha./Van.,85, 103,; last chapter of the Ramayana, etc.
56. Maha./Van, 85,69-75; 88, 18; 184, 92, etc.
57. Ibid, 183, 113; 183, 139, etc.
58. The epics, Puranas and the other ancient literature copiously describe 'Bhakti' as a way of worship. Mahabharat advises to bow down the *Bhakta* born in Chandala family (Gita Press edition) pp. 6376-80; Shrimad Bhagwat is a Puran mostly of Bhakti cult.
59. Sarma, S.N., *The Neo-Vaishnavite Novement and the Satra Institution in Assam,* pp.4-5
60. The people of the Eastern India take meat and fish and the Shakta and Shaiva worship is more prominent in this part of the country. Many tribal communities take meat, fish and wine and worship Shiva and Kali.
61. In spite of strong roots of the Tantric Hinduism, Shaktism and Shaivism, Bhakti movement was very prominent and strong in Bengal, Assam and Manipur.
62. The persons initiated into Vaishnavism are given beads of Tulasi plant and they avoid non-vegetarian meal after wearing the same.
63. Brahman widows avoid taking fish.
64. Fishes having no scale of having the shape of a serpent were tabooed according to the Yogini Tantra (II.05.275).
65. Hodson, op. cit., p. 47; they take fish and avoid taking meat.
66. Brahmans of Mithila take both meat and fish.
67. Konkanastha Brahmanas take fish.
68. Ghurye, op.cit.,pp.252.
69. Ibid, pp.254,257.
70. Risley, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 495; The Koch and many other tribes do so.
71. The Gotra are classified into the group of five and three to form pravaras.
72. The boys and girls born in the same gotra or within the prohibited degree of kinship are considered to be the brothers and the sisters and therefore marriage between them is considered to be incestuous and is prohibited.
73. Mandelbaum, op. cit., pp. 236-37.

74. Ibid.
75. Ibid, p. 237
76. Ibid, p. 238
77. Ibid, p. 237
78. Risley, op. cit., pp. 158-59.
79. Mandelbaum, op. cit., p. 238.; Risley, op. cit., pp. 147-48.
80. Manu., X. 64-66.
81. Ibid, X. 67-68.
82. Ibid, Chapter X.
83. Ghurye, op. cit., p.2.
84. Mandelbaum, op. cit., pp. 285-91.
85. Lohars in the Munda and Oraon villages do not have their separate caste panchayats and refer their cases for settlements to the tribal village councils of the Mundas and the Oraons.
86. Mandelbaum, op. cit., pp. 279, 284.
87. Ghurye, op. cit., pp. 3-4.
88. Ibid, p.4.
89. Singh, K.S., Sikkim, pp. 132-33.
90. Ibid, p. 133.
91. Risley, op. cit., p. 196.
92. Ibid.
93. Manu. X. 43.
94. Ibid, X,44.
95. Risley, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 492; The Koch tribe has such a tradition.
96. Risley, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 312.
97. Ibid, Vol. I, p. 277.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid. Vol. II, p. 22.
100. Ibid.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid, p. 270.
103. Ghurya, op. cit., p. 13.
104. Ibid, p. 38.
105. Baines, Sir Athelstane, *Ethnogrphy,* Stralsburg, 1912, p. 26.
106. Manu. II., 168.
107. Mahabharat/Adi./166.4-21.
108. Ghurye, op. cit., p. 17.
109. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India*, 1951; pp. 169-70.
110. Shrinivas, *Social Change in Modern India,* p. 7.
111. Shrinivas, *Caste: its Twentieth Century Avatar*, 1996, pp. 158, 168.
112. Shrinivas, *Social Change in India,* p.6
113. Such distortions and the motivations have been fully discussed in other chapters of this book.
114. Kumar, B.B. *Tribal Societies of India*, pp.12-26.

Caste, Census, and the Colonial Interpretations

Shashi Shekhar Sharma*

EVERY PROBLEM AND CRISIS OF THE INDIAN SOCIETY, INCLUDING brutal assaults on its people and the occupation of its territory by the use of force, fraud and technology has been attributed to the inherent failings of the Hindus themselves. Two of the most important handicaps of the Hindus have been universally proclaimed to be: i) their alleged brutal brahmanic core, and ii) their pernicious caste system. Most failure of the Indians have been explained on the basis of these twin principles or essences which have also been projected as the reasons why Indian society has not progressed sufficiently and remained mired in conflicts and crises. "Scholars did this", suggests Ronald Inden, "by imagining an India kept eternally ancient by various essences attributed to it, most notably that of caste".

The various essences of India are primarily located in its allegedly defunct religious ideas, incorrigibly hierarchized social structures, and a woolly sense of philosophical rationality. The construction of Hindu 'essences' was executed by resorting to alternative naming strategies that ascribed to local ideas a patina of meaning that corroded their traditional connotations. The intention, as we would soon see, was to disrupt the Hindu philosophic and cultural consensus by splitting its discourse into an assumed 'brahmanic orthodoxy' and a plethora of 'protestant' and 'heretic' schools who consistently challenged we are told, the hegemonic authority of Brahmanism. Associated with this philosophical critique, in fact, emerging from it, was the notion of the Hindu society as a congerie of irredeemably antagonistic units whose identities were mostly ascribed, and in many instances a product of their split from brahmanic Hinduism.

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The cultural worldview based on the *Vedas*, the *Upanisadas*, the *Gita,* and various schools of *darœana* was called Brahmanism or Brahmanic Hinduism; the tradition enunciated in the Puranas and the Epics was shown to be popular Hinduism; the tradition of the Hindu saints and savants came to be represented as 'protestant' Hinduism and 'rebellious' democratic departures from Brahmanism. The traditions, the teachers, and the sects which were subjected to alternative naming may not themselves have claimed to embark on an exercise of rebellion, but that does not seem to have mattered to the modern interpreters. The history of Hinduism, according to them is primarily a series of splits, rebellions, departures and schism from a supposed core of orthodoxy whose parameters few commentators were able to fully locate, and in awareness of this failure conveniently named it as Brahmanism. One of the explanations for this attitude can be found in the historical experience of the Abrahamic religions, to which most European scholars, orientalists, and early Indologists belonged. In the Abrahamic worldwide alternative interpretations of a religious dogma, and recourse to individualistic quest for transcendent meanings was treated as heretical doctrinal split and group rebellion. Anyone who wanted to persue a spiritual life based on his own personal apperception of reality, was branded a heretic, apostate or a *murtad* and was hounded, harangued, harassed and frequently hung. The notion of a religious or philosophical orthodoxy is an Abrahamic idea. The Hindu tradition has revelled in the fecund manifestation of man's capacity to explore and understand spiritual truth without reference to a presupposed master-dogma. The orientalist scholarship applied the Abrahamic paradigm to the pluralistic Hindu tradition, but with a unique inversion of meaning. Whereas, in the Abrahamic tradition the slightest departure from the officially proclaimed dogma was regarded as a criminal heresy and schismatism and was meted with brutal repression, in India the same trend was declared to be progressive, egalitarian, democratic and left-leaning.

A second major aspect of an Indological critique of the Hindu tradition, later also of modern historiography and liberal sociology, was to create a contrived split between 'brahmanic' Hinduism of Aryan, upper caste provenance and an imagined 'protestant' Hinduism subscribed by the majority of backward communities whose cultural ideas said to have always expressed inveterate hostility to the orthodoxy of the brahamans. Hindu society, according the them, was fundamentally a congerie of innumerably hostile identities, whose only certainity consisted in the disharmony between the brahmanic Hindus on the one hand, and the grand alliance of other egalitarian and progressive Hindu forces on the other. All that was wrong, has always been wrong in India's sociopolitical sphere, was the doing of the 'brahmanic' Hindus; all that was progressive and modernist was located in the assorted subaltern groups ranged on the other side of the Hindu divide. This tradition of interpretation did not emerge in the world of the Indian academician and the historians. Its initial stirrings can be discerned in the polemics of the missionary literature of a number of evangelical corporations. The early Christian literature is spitefully hostile to the whole brahman community because many of them saw in this community of teachers, philosophers and cultural mediators, a great impediment to the spread of the religion of Christ in India. Many of them plainly recognized the important leadership role of the brahman community and believed that no progress can be made in proselytizing the Hindu unless the brahmans are made to look guilty, and it is established that the other castes were different from and hostile to them and their Hindu cultural worldview.

Early anti-brahmanism was mainly the handiwork of the Christian missionaries who believed that by desecrating the authority of the brahmans they may begin to gradually wean away a few communities from within the confused and unsure family of the Hindus. Their second obsessive preoccupation was with the caste system. This obsession did not emanate from a concern for communal homogenisation among the Hindus, but from a realization that the organization of jatis, and the securities and collective identities that it gave to its members, was a great impediment to conversions. The initial diatribe against caste, was not inspired by a desire to achieve equality of status and distribution of power markers, but to free individuals from the benefits, assurances as well as penalties of the caste structure. The demand for abolition of caste was mainly the articulation of the desire to withdraw from an individual his group identity by highlighting his personal and isolated existence as a hallmark of his moral advancement. Jati cohesion was portrayed as primordialist and pre-modern, a morality of the pigsty, from which the modern man must be liberated as a free-willing, uprooted and convertible individual. Louis Dumont has rightly pointed out that West's excessive concern for individualism was the greatest impediment in the understanding of caste. One of the first 'progressive' anti-caste colonial legislations was the Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850, which first and foremost, facilitated religious conversions in a big way by ensuring property and inheritance rights to a person who abdicates his jati identity and responsibilities or converts to another religion.

By the end of the nineteenth century the caste question transmuted itself into a political question which had two major dimensions: i) desire of the colonial regime to manage a vast Indian population through its debilitating segmentation and ii) using, what they believed was, the 'caste system' for the purpose of emasculation and manipulation of social space. The background note for administrative reference and consideration was already provided by the polemical discourse of missionary organizations and scholars of Indology, who insisted that caste must be recognized as an iniquitous institution located at the very heart of Hindu religiocultural discourse and socioeconomic practice. British interface, therefore, with Indians, especially the Hindu part of it, was not supposed to proceed on the basis of their entitlement to citizenship, but on the principle of their ethnic componentization. Identities that hitherto had remained confined to providing a sense of kinship affiliation, social security, community succour, and group cooperation in the performance of a member's or a family's social obligations, were encouraged to become politicized and antagonistic. Even by the time British rule was fully entrenched in India after 1857, jatis had not become rigid ghettoes of specific occupational and social groupings. Bernard Cohn has argued cogently that colonial knowledge and census operations were significantly responsible for the modern version of caste.

If the British wanted to know about the nature of the jatis and varnas in India, they should have just referred to the Manusmrti, which in their view was, the basic Hindu manual of the castes, or they should have ascertained the opinion of the learned brahmans living within various communities ‾ and not paid employees ‾ who by common consensus were the guardians of the 'caste system' and knew all about it. But the colonial state and the oriental scholars did nothing of this sort because they must have realized that reference to the *Dharmasastra* tradition and the voice of its native interpreters would spoil the whole purpose of the caste discourse and put a lie to the propaganda that caste was a rigid religious institution, hierarchized on the basis of sastric injunctions by the brahmans. The reason for the avoidance of any reference to the indigenous mediators was that the colonial regime was less interested in understanding and explicating the meaning of the idea behind the organization of jatis, and more in converting them into prefabricated castes. For so many years European scholars and colonial administrators have been crediting the *Dharmasastra* and the brahmans for creating and perpetuating the caste system, but when it came to understanding its current position they surprisingly forgot these brahmanic authorities and relied on missionary polemicists, colonial ethnographers, phrenology experts, and field enumerators. The colonial state proceeded to understand the reality of castes and their inter se seniority on the basis of government proformas designed by the superintendents of censuses. The ethnographic theories, sociological formulations, and the pre-designed official questionnaires were the instruments with which the British invented caste in India.

For a European man, the communitarian idea of jati appeared highly perplexing and, enamoured as he was of his own modern individualism, he regarded a sociologic mode of existence as primitive. Within the jati nexus, on the contrary, it is possible to operate as an individual as well as a part of a sociological space and still find effective methods to relate to an overarching political dispensation. Although Dumont insisted that hierarchical values were an important ingredient of Indian social thought, he refused to acknowledge that these values led to compulsory ascription of inequality and socioeconomic subordination. He wrote that "To adopt a value is to introduce hierarchy, a certain consensus of values, a certain hierarchy of ideas and people, is indispensable to social life... No doubt, in the majority of cases, hierarchy will be identified in some way with power but there is no necessity for this, as the case of India will show".

Caste occupied the centerstage of colonial and orientalist discourse because it became, on the sociological plane, a counterpart of the "disorderly imagination" of the Hindus and their confused and irrational negotiation of objective world reality. There was nothing overtly 'rational' about the Indological critique of caste, apart from an expression of their cultural biases, hence Ronald Inden had no hesitation in stating that "the idea of an India lost in dreams and divided into castes is not an isolate based on empirical research. It exists as part of a wider 'orientalist' discourse..." Caste was responsible for India's stagnation, caste fragmented Indian polity, and most importantly, caste led to India's repeated subjugation by outsiders. This is the near unanimous opinion of orientalists, colonial authorities, modern historians and anti-caste activists. But facts point in another direction. Firstly, one major 'invasion' (assuming for argument sake) and occupation of India, which a powerful group of modern historians insist took place, namely of the Aryans, cannot be attributed to the incidence of caste, because caste, the same historians believe, was an invention of the Aryans themselves. So it was possible for India to be invaded, conquered and subjugated even in the absence of brahmans and the caste system. Secondly, throughout the recorded history of India we have no evidence that India had a *bania* state or a *koeri* state, or the like and implacably hostile to each other.

This whole theory of caste as a reason for India's political defeat is so decrepit and bogus that one is surprised historians even deign to contemplate it seriously. It is not worth a dime because it is based not on facts but prejudiced imagination conjuring up visions of 'caste kingdoms' and political scenarios where specific 'caste-nations' failed to muster the collaboration of other caste-nations in their defensive enterprise. If caste was not a factor in the defeat of the Arab world, how could it have been so in the case of the Indians. When Ghazni came, what confronted him were the principalities of Thanesar, Kannauj and Mathura not the brahmans, yadavas, and banias of India unless, of course one is persuaded to belief that thanesar was a jat kingdom and therefore the kingdom of the ahirs and the rajputs did not cooperate, but that would be silly.

Most Muslim historians including Prof. K.A. Nazami would not hesitate to aver that caste has been the cause of all Hindu misfortune. Even Prof. Habib, in his comment on Muslim success in India, has chosen only those textual passages for citation which reiterate the political disadvantages of having a caste-based system. Dr. Parmatma Saran finds the "iniquitous system of caste" as one of the probable causes of Hindu defeat, which is rather surprising because only a few paragraphs earlier, in the same work, he had informed us that the Ghurid and other Islamic successes "cannot be attributed solely to the social and religious peculiarities of the Hindus, for our ideas about them are also vague and indistinct and based on no sure knowledge of facts". Caste as an explanation of defeat is only due to the fact that historians borrowed the colonial orientalist depiction of caste and used it as a readymade explanation in such cases where no explanation was readily available to them. Caste became the symbol of collective hermeneutic incapacity and the pusillanimous excuse for our defeatist paranoia. Ultimately, it only reinforced the oriental depiction of Hindus as irrational, impulsive and wolly-headed.

European scholars like Senart, Mill, Roland Inden and even Hegel, held caste system for alleged primitivism, and socio-political backwardness of Hindus. Louis Dumont believed that the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system is maintained by the equation of 'purity' with 'power' in the social sphere, which in other words was merely a Weberian reformulation of the old thesis that in India the sacredotium used its power to stultify the regnum and thus dyke secular rationality to assume its logical progress. This insistence on the role of the sacred in the sociopolitical sphere of the Hindus, occludes the centrality of the king's position in the secular sphere of man. The king was the protector of his realm, the master of all, the upholder of *danda*, (penal power) and the most vital cog in the political machine. The central role of the king or the political state, however, was not allowed to assume legal stranglehold of civic society as it would eventually happen in western ideology and practice. The Hindu state had a very limited sociocultural role. The king was the protector of the rights and conventions of the sects, jatis, varnas, and tribal groups, which gave to these entities an expansiveness, structural elasticity and access to externalized diffusion, so that clannishness in the name of a caste or a sect held no significant emotive value. As long as the king and the state provided protection, curbed the errant, and enacted the ritual of inclusive communitarianism, there was no reason for a varna or a 'caste' to mark itself in closed, internally defined and hierarchised idioms. The king did not set social norms he merely enforced such norms that were established in the society on the basis of the consensus of the members of that society.

Through the combined efforts to Jones, Mill and Hegel; empirical realists like Risley; and romantic idealist like Schlegel, 'caste' got overdetermined, centralized and essentialized in the European mind. The presence of distinctions and differences between various jatis located within a specific political space of a *janapada* or a village did not distort the notion of their collective citizenship. Even if we take the village as a unit we would see that citizenship rights were available to all communities notwithstanding the differences between them. There are many instances of village councils comprising members of all jatis, including the so-called lowest, being convened to settle local disputes. We know of may instances where disputes between two brahmans was settled by local *panchayats* whose memberships included sudras and the untouchables. Anyhow, in the voice of the modernist scholar, caste remained in some way, fundamentally related to Indian civilization, culture and tradition, a centrality it never possessed in the pre-modern period. Nicholas Dirks argues that "caste as we know it today is not in fact some unchanged survival of ancient India, not some single system that reflects a core civilizational value, not a basic expression of Indian tradition. Rather, I will argue that caste (again, as we know it today) is a modern phenomena, that it is specifically, the product of an historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule... I *am* suggesting that it was under the British that caste became s single term capable of expressing, organizing, and "systematizing" India's diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization... In short, colonialism made caste what it is today". The orientalists and the colonial regime simplified stereotypified, and distorted the meaning of a complex concept through a project of misrecognition: But 'caste' was not the overbearing reality of the Indian situation even on the threshold of modernity. Even many European scholars like Duarte Barbosa, Dirks, Baptiste Taverniel, Abbey (who was contemptuous of Hinduism) do not accord caste a central determinant status, and some even approve of it.

The problem which the good Abbey Dubois encountered en route his mission for conversion of the Hindus, was also shared by many other evangelists of the era. Their diatribe against caste was not as much prompted by a desire for reform of the Hindu society, as it was on account of the implacable solidity of the system in the face of Christian catechism. Missionary failure to breach the Hindu society during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries impelled many reverends and fathers to focus their attention on caste (as the reason for their failure) for special critical evaluation. Most missionaries politely concluded that caste was "the most cursed invention of the devil that ever existed and began to insist on renunciation of caste". The failure of their efforts to gain converts, except a few from amongst the lower castes, fuelled their resentment, goading them further to seek destruction of this powerful social body. William Carey of the Seprampore Mission noted that "All are bound to their present state by caste, in breaking whose chains a man must endure to be renounced and abhorred by his wife, children and friends. Every tie that twines around the heart of a husband, father and neighbor must be torn and broken, before a man can give himself to Christ". The modern apocryphal and contemptuous discourse on caste system draws its inspiration from the critique of the missions whose blatantly partisan narrative was primarily a product of their theological concern for conversions. Dirks says: "Given the preoccupation with, and history of, conversion, missionaries came to hold a special contempt for caste; their ascription to it of a totalizing power was not seen in other contemporaneous British writings".

Secular European writings pertaining to our period do not devote much attention to caste practices and make some formulaic presentation when this subject is touched. They do not tell us about the fanciful stories of caste-wars, oppression, subjugation and 'ascriptive inequalities', which in the later decades became the staple fare of sociological debate. Many writers believed caste to be a purely civil institution having no religious backing for it; a view initially shared by Bishop Heber and some other preachers. The Missionary Society of Madras believed, vis-à-vis the role of the new convert, that "it cannot be in the power or wish of the Society to abolish all distinctions of ranks and degrees in India". This nevertheless remained mostly an early minority view, and by the middle of the nineteenth century all hues of envangelical personages came to agree that "caste was an unmitigated evil". The reasons offered for the evilness of caste was not empirical, sociological, factual, welfarist, or even based on a study of the sastras; the main reason for caste being bad was its resistance to evangelism and the colonial agenda. The Madras Missionary Conference resolved in 1850 that caste "is one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the Gospel in India".

Apart from early missionary literature, the British writings on India in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century too, "tended to say relatively little about caste and to be formulaic at best...". This fact must engage our attention, because it suggests two important problematics: i) caste did not exist in India in the manner later literature insinuated it did, and ii) the nature and functioning of the system did not partake of the ills which later scholarship began to associate with it. It also suggests that the reconstruction of caste and the reorientation of the discourse regarding it is a very recent phenomenon, materializing in the world of the colonial administrators and the state ethnographers. Colin Mackenzie had collected a vast number of local texts, oral traditions and histories when he worked as a cartographer and surveyor in south India between 1784 and 1821. His collection was a vast record of local south Indian life and culture. The Mackenzie collection contains little reference to caste and had very few caste histories included in it but soon, all this was to change and later ethnographers, working in the same area as Mackenzie, would draw from the same cultural material very different conclusions ‾ conclusions which slowly began to drag caste center-stage in the narrative of the colonial researcher and interpreter. After the upheaval of 1857, the emergence of new challenges forced the Raj to forge new technologies for dealing with the problems of social control and political co-option, and in the course of that effort "anthropology supplanted history as the principle colonial modality of knowledge and rule. By the late nineteenth century... the colonial state in India can be characterized as the ethnographic state". Dirks has recorded this shift in colonial emphasis: "The relative silence about caste matters in early official writings as well as in collections of local texts such as Mackenzie's gave way to new kinds of compendia – from miscellaneous collections and volumes, official manuals and gazetteers, to the census – in which caste figured as the most important subject and classificatory schema for the organization of India's social world".

The ethnographic state began to dissect India's social life with a "peculiar colonial intransitivity", but the more it went on to "refine caste categories to allow the enumeration of the entire population of India by caste, the more it seemed that caste categories were overlapping, unstable and contested". This, however, was not considered a problem, because ethnographers believed that dense ambiguities prevalent in the ideational as well as practical spheres of caste were not obstacles to objective assessment, but a problem emerging from less rigorous enumeration, scheduling, and codification. The background provided by the missionary polemic on caste was available as a normative ray of hope in case certain incongruent facts, which otherwise did not fit the colonial presuppositions of caste, were needed to be explained. Hence, caste was to be seen in an essentialized mode of social representation, and in this mode we have the 'wily Brahman' at the one end of the spectrum, and the degraded sudra at the other. With the antinomies of Hindu society so clearly identified and articulated, reverend M.A. Sherring (1872) had no problems in asserting, "Caste is sworn enemy of human happiness"; "Caste is opposed to intellectual freedom"; "Caste sets its face sternly against progress". These assertions, and the presupposed conclusions were based not on historical premises but on theological assumptions. The aim of this scholarship was to create split in the Hindu society and incite the so called 'lower castes by chanelizing their incipient political ambitions into confrontationist religious schism. Sherring advises the 'non-brahmanic' groups, whatever it meant, that if they be so inclined they can "destroy Brahmanism root and branch – can utterly annihilate it".

This reduction of caste to essentialized discrete identities, swirling perpetually in relationships of antagonism, was in sharp contrast to the historical experience of the Hindus in which social identities were deritualized and liquid. Caste did not act as a disincentive to most socioeconomic vocations and thereby saved itself from the ills of incorrigible ghettoisation. It remained primarily a marker of kinship affiliation. Dirks has rightly remarked that "In fact, caste neither exhausted the range of social forms, functions, and identities, nor provided underlying unit. The only common social facts of caste concerned the codification of kinship relations and, to some extent, the protocols for interdining".

Caste was constructed, partly through retrospective textualization of autonomous and diverse traditions by orientalist scholars, and partly under the intense pressure of missionary organizations. They first needed to raise the scepter of 'caste' in order to ask for its annihilation. Once the mission authorities were able to raise a coordinated roucus on caste, they began petitioning the government for effective state intervention to neutralize its menace. The colonial administration took heed of these submissions and tried to map the data included in the missionary reports through its own surveys and censuses. The census of India, argues Kevin Honson, was not merely an attempt to count human entities but to define and explain those entities: "As a result, the census became not simply an accounting of what existed but an active participant in the creation and modification of the society". In the process of enumerating the Hindu society, colonial censuses "forced the Indian system into a schematic in a way that had never been experienced in the past". Although many like W.C. Plowden, who prepared the general census report in 1872 of the Northwest province, warned against the use of caste as a unit social life, their advice was not taken seriously by the government. Henry Waterfield refuted the assumption that a majority of the members of a particular caste follow the occupation according to which they were arranged in the census. These voices, however, were stifled under the demands of realipolitik. How the modern notions of castes, to prove the fragmentary nature of Hindu society, was created through the methods adopted by the census authorities, can be seen in the figures returned for the Madras province. The number of caste went up from 3208 in 1971 to 19004 in 1981.

Interestingly, the proliferation of caste organizations and Jâti Mahâsabhâs coincided with the commencement of the census of India, and historians tell us that a majority of them had come into existence to protect their position and status which they saw as being disturbed by the government enumerators. The old certainties of the communitarian and ecological social life were being undermined by the brave new world of competitive individualism and the equation of social worth with governmental recognition. Castes began to be encouraged to look to the state for settlement of relationships and social identities, rather than let it happen through the deliberation of interactive communities. The sleight-of-hand was that in the census operations an individual subject was not enumerated as he actually was; he was listed, most egregiously, by first being put in the ambit of an imagined caste. The decennial censuses were less interested in the enumeration of human individuals, than in mapping, creating and returning social and occupation categories.

The 1871 census proposed to map Indians under six broad categories and sixty subgroups. These 'categories' and 'subgroups' were fixed *a Priori*. Indian people were sought to be assigned to one of them irrespective of the violence such assignation did to the actual situation. This antecedent categorization of Hindu society precluded the free and unbiased assessment of ground reality. The enumerators of the 1891 census were advised to use only such caste occupation that had been "assigned to it by tradition, and generally implied in its current appellation". This stipulation was enjoined by the census authorities in full awareness of the fact, corroborated by their own sources and reports, that most members of a particular caste have "diverged widely from the means of subsistence from which they respectively take their name". Although the 1891 census jettisoned the use of varna as a criteria for enumeration, the colonial fascination for the settled forms of social ordering based on their own reading of certain úâstric texts, did not get completely exorcised.

Any statistical enumeration of entities is fundamentally dependent on the criteria selected to be used by the enumerator, and the classificatory categories which are devised to collect, collate, index and eventually broadcast the acquired data. The process of asking questions, the provocation caused within communities by insertions of predetermined but faulty methodology, and the insistence on eliciting response on social as well as individual statuses, not singly but in relationship to others, was bound to pervert responses. The colonial enumerators asked such question and made such entries that would reinforce their presupposed faith about varna and caste acquired under the aegis of missionary, orientalist and racist discourse. The Hindu population was broken into brahmans, rajputs, and "other castes", the latter again were subdivided into agricultural and artisnal groups. The main purpose of these naming exercise was to devise "practical techniques for standardizing and hierarching caste names". Spellings were standardized, secondary additions to caste names were removed, and castes were organized "according to hierarchical principles that were seen as providing order and differences between castes are not derived from úâstric injunctions or the historical experiences of the communities. It became problematic when caste, and the numbers associated with it, became an important marker for political action and patronage. If an 'Untouchable' caste, for example, defines its identity simply in antagonistic politicized terms, reactive mobilization of other communities would inevitably follow. It is an unfortunate fact of our shared history that the movement for political independence began in an environment which was badly vitiated by colonial anthropology and its construction of segregated and fragmented channels for Indian social life and identity. Competitive caste-based political mobilization replaced the age old collaborative structures of Hindu society and made caste a zero sum game: a gain only at your loss or, at least, in conceiving of myself in antagonism to you. The colonial narrative slowly got mainstreamed in the political negotiation conducted by the nationalist discourse.

Risley's writings became normative for most caste organizations, who used his racist and divisive formulations to contest their position and importance by asserting their ethnic segregation. The fact that this theory of racial difference between various Hindu communities was fixed and determined by the colonial scholarship rather than the Hindu úâstras, was not noted in the haste to seek political recognition and pro rata administrative representation. J H. Hutton, the census commissioner in 1931, wrote that "All subsequent census officers in India must have cursed the day when it occurred to Sir Herbert Risley, no doubt in order to test his admirable theory of the relative nasal index, to attempt to draw up a list of castes according to their rank in society. He failed, but the results of his attempt are almost as troublesome as if he had succeeded, for every census gives rise to a pestiferous deluge of representations accompanied by highly problematic histories, asking for recognition". Dirks adds to this matter by saying: "The first two decades of the twentieth century saw an explosion of writing on the subject of caste, much of it around claims by specific caste groups for higher status in the context of varna classification. In spite of the official decision to cease ranking castes in the census. Risley's influence was long-lived. Risley had lasting influence on British caste literature ...And Risley had dramatic influence on a rise of caste organizations and the exploding production of literature about the caste system and its principles of order by Indians from all over the subcontinent ...And when castes asked for recognition, they did so in the vested Brahmanical languages of varna that Risley had done so much to revive and racialize".

The law courts set up by the colonial regime did not remain immune for long to the missionary and colonial propaganda about castes. In their Anglo-saxon legal desire to enforce a centralized and uniform law in the whole country, they began interfering with many customary practices of castes and communities. The Bombay High Court in 1876 ruled: "Courts of Law will not recognize the authority of a caste to declare a marriage void, or to give permission to a woman to remarry". In many temples of south India "the customary practice of widow remarriage within certain castes was discontinued after the government took over the management of temples and outlawed the use of such temples for rituals not deemed to have support from the sastra". Not only were the úâstras misinterpreted but their indisputed subordination to customary practices and social conventions was forgotten, and a new idea of Hindu social life was reconstructed which stultified many progressive and equitable tendencies inherent in them. Robert Caldwell's assertion that the *Shanars* of Tamilnadu were of non-Aryan origin was decried initially by the educated members of the community who claimed to belong to the same Aryan brotherhood as others. The *Shanars,* later listed in 1921 census as *Nadar*, "in deference of the wishes of the *Nadar* community", made many attempts to acquire kœatriya status in the official records, but their claims were considered to be absurd and based on fictitious claims of Aryanness. When a few *Nadars* entered the Meenakshi temple to perform rituals appropriate to their social status, a legal dispute ensued and the colonial courts ruled that since the *Nadars'* claim to be Aryans could not be sustained, inspite of the *Nadars* themselves saying so, their status as kœatriya could not be accepted. Many castes who returned themselves as kœatriya owing to their long employment as soldiers in the army were disappointed by the courts which ruled that changes in occupational status cannot be accepted as a marker of the altered varna of a person; a travesty of the dharmasastric and Hindu consensus on this matter.

That the Hindu social structure was perverted by colonial administration, was recognized by many administrators themselves. Middleton, a superintendent of the census operations of 1921, remarked on the adverse effects of colonial administration on castes in Punjab: "I had intended pointing out that there is a very wide revolt against the classification of occupational castes; that these castes have been largely manufactured and almost entirely preserved as separate castes by the British Government. Two other strands were woven into the armature of colonial ethnography. First, a sinister design was set afoot to reduce the demographic quantity of the Hindus by the adoption of highly impressionistic and divisive indicators. Second, the enumerators sought to increase the number of such new groups, viz. animists, untouchables, etc., who were gradually proclaimed to be non-Hindus. Till the census of 1901, Indian populations were counted under the heading, Muslims, Hindus, and Christians. For the 1911 census a new principle of classification was adopted and for the first time Hindus were asked to be returned under three distinct categories – i) Hindus, ii) animists and tribals, and iii) the depressed classes or untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar has pointed out that this new classification for Hindus was adopted under the pressure of the Muslim League, which in its address presented in 1909 to Lord Minto, apart from seeking special political weightage and separate electorate for the Muslims, requested for a reassessment of the numerical strength of the Hindus by segregating the 'animists' and other 'minor' religion from the Hindu fold.

The importance of these divisive measures became more pronounced against the backdrop of the introduction of separate electorates in 1909, whereafter sectarian statistics became of utmost importance. Kingsler Davis pointed out that "another source of error, especially prominent since separate religious electorates were inaugurated in 1909, is deliberate misrepresentation. There had been an increasing pressure on the part of religious groups to swell their number in the census". P.B. Desai has corroborated this view and said that "the awakening political consciousness extorted a distorting influence on the conduct of census". Dr. Ambedkar stated that "The Muslims have always been looking at the Depressed Classes with a sense of longing ... In 1909 the Muslims took the bold step of suggesting that the depressed Classes should not be enrolled in the census as Hindus". Through this suggestion was not accepted by the state fully, a subtle way was found to achieve the same results by reducing the gross numbers of the Hindus and slyly augmenting the number of the 'Depressed' Classes. During the census of 1911, census superintendents were advised to enumerate separately such castes and tribes who were returned as Hindus but did not conform to certain ritual practices. For achieving this purpose an advisory was circulated to help the enumerators list all those castes separately as non-Hindus which i) deny the supremacy of the brahmans, ii) do not receive the mantra from a brahman, iii) deny the authority of the *Vedas,* iv) do not worship the great Hindu gods, v) are not served by good brahman priests, vi) have no brahman priests at all, vii) are denied access to the interior of Hindu temples, viii) cause pollution, ix) bury their dead, x) eat beef and do not revere the cow.

A cursory look at these parameters would make obvious that many of them were designed to elicit expected answers, and some of them were not even acknowledged indicators of Hinduness. Another important feature of the census related activities was the desire to inflate the number of the depressed castes. Various reports showed conflicting estimates of their number but the general trend was towards inflation. The seventh quinquennial review of education in India, 1912-17, estimated the population of the depressed classes at 31,5496 million. After 1917 the "numbers of the depressed classes began to swell" in the official records. The Southborough Committee in 1919 put their number at 42.2 million. The Home Department estimates, prepared in 1920 for submission to the Parliament, put the number only at 29.36 million, but the census commissioner for 1921 put the figure at 43.3 million. In another report prepared by the government in 1924 the number of depressed classes was put at 60 million. Based on these facts, S.K. Gupta contends: "These inconsistencies uphold the nationalist stance that the untouchables were a recent discovery to [sic] the British... It remains further inexplicable as to why the Government believed and even worked out different estimates. Thus it might not be a forced inference that the British Raj had begun to value the number of the depressed classes to check the tide of nationalism", by promoting political importance to fragment the Hindu society.

The point that emerges from the study of missionary literature, orientalist writings, colonial ethnography and the enumerative strategies of the British government, forces us to critique the monological diatribe that goes on harping upon caste, as we know it today, being a perennial institution of the Hindus, created, crafted and fixed in an unchanging matrix by their *Dharmaúâstras*. The *Dharmaúâstra* did not index or hierarchise jâti; they never undertook a census operation nor defined what the role, relevance or status of a jâti would be. The inter-jâti relationships were left to be regulated by autonomous civil contracts under varying circumstances that included incidences of conflict. The *Dharmaúâstras* merely record their perception of social reality based on a structural as well as functional understanding of their purpose. The ordinal positioning of the varnas may have had a certain value-judgement attached to it, but in the case of jâtis (perversely called castes) no role ascriptions are assigned. The texts merely say that a particular jâti seems to have come into existence in a particular cognate manner, or that they seem to occupy a particular territory and pursue certain similar vocations. The association with vocation was also mostly stylistic, or at best based on what obtained at the time of its recording. The *Mâgadha* who was said to perform servile or sychophantic roles for the kings, we knows was also a trader, builder, agriculturist and king.

Jâti identities were internally determined and remained non-ascriptive, free and constantly evolving. It was possible for the members of a guild of weavers from Mandsaur to migrate to north India and split into many groups by adopting professions as diverse as of soldiers, *sannyâsi* and astrologers. No text was thrown at them, nor a roster of castes consulted, to stop and prevent the emergence of new castes and professional identities. In reality, no one bothered as to which community did what; there was no mechanism to ensure observation and enforcement of jâti identities. One of the reasons why jâtis became castes in India can be found in the worldview of the Abrahamic religions. The Abrahamic religions believe in fixed, regulated and unchanging identities that are scripturally defined - a faithful, a *momin* a believer, a kafir, an infidel, a *mushrik,* a heretic - and are eternally immutable; departure from classified identities are seen as great cataclysm, a *fitna*, a disruption of order. When the Muslims and the British looked at the Indian society, they viewed it through their Abrahamic, monotheistic, and scripturalist perspective.

The Abrahamic background of the European narrators forced them to find a 'religion' for those Indians who were not Muslim, Christian, Jew or Zoroastrian. In their initial writings they include all other categories under the heading 'Hindu' - It was much later, under the compulsions of evangelism and running a colonial empire, that various groups, who were seen earlier as Hindus and whose practices were bandied about to castigate Hinduism, were treated as 'rebellious', 'protestant', non-brahmanic', 'animist', 'heretical', and even 'non-Hindu] categories by the colonial scholars and mission academicians. To be a 'heretic' in Christianity and Islam is a decadent, sinful and dangerous avocation; in the Hindu world a 'heretic' was declared to be a progressive rebel against brahamanic and debauch Hinduism' - a progressive sage or a sect. This Abrahamic perspective created a 'Hinduism' which never was, and in the process tried to split so many integrated communities who shared a common cultural vision.

Please remember that Hindus believe, even the most orthodox one, that god can be apprehended in three hundred any thirtythree million ways, so there was no question of prescribing which was a big or small god; which was a brahman god and which was a úûdra's or an 'animist's' god. But the colonial regime and the census operators did precisely that. A Christian and a Muslim can not even comprehend that the same person can be very fond of one manifestation of god, but be equally reverential towards another; that a Hindu does not subscribe to an either-or spirituality which would suggest to him that you are a follower of Christ you must necessarily be hateful of Rama; that it is possible to have access to wide range of spiritual insights simultaneously.

How the tribal communities of India viewed their identity *vis-a-vis* the larger cultural world in which they lived is eloquently exemplified in the response of the *Korku* tribe. Kitts records: "when the hill people were pressed for a reply as to what their religion was, sometimes after much parleying, they said either they were Hindoos, or that they knew nothing about religion; that they were *arani log*, ignorant people [sic]. All they knew was, they were Korku by caste. Nowhere, as far as I can discover, did a single individual assert that there was such a distinct and a separate thing as a Korku religion; he merely answered to the effect 'I am a *Korku,* but I do not know what my religion is called. I worship Mahadeo, Hanuman, Byrambai, Chand, Suraj and Bhagwant who is author of my religion, call it what you please". But from the above we must not get the impression that Hindus did not have a sense of community feeling based on certain shared cultural ideas and civilizational norms. If the tribal people shared *Hanuman* and *Mahadev* and *Bhagavant*, the orthodox' brahmans worshipped the banyan, and the peepal tree; spirits, omens and a great assortment of local animist deities were the main objects of reverence of many grand brahman ladies. An impervious 'religious' boundary between a brahman and a tribal did not exist and both understood one another well when they met; after all, Œabari could discourse with Rama on many common cultural issues apart from sharing her food with him. The problems caused by gentoo scholarship and the colonial regime in the Hindu society were ascribed to a few didactic texts of traditional value. Rene Guenon has rightly warned us that "when it is a question of traditional institutions, a uniquely 'sociological' point of view proves insufficient to get to the depths of things, since the true foundation of these institutions is really of a 'cosmological' order".

Caste in Medieval India: The Beginnings of a Reexamination[1]

Dileep Karanth*

Introduction

"Who says India says caste, or so it seems." So wrote J. C. Heesterman in his essay "Caste , Village and Indian Society",[2] underlining the centrality of the problem of caste in India. Heesterman points out the word *caste* started out meaning something like "tribe" or "race", but in the nineteenth century it came to mean something very specific, a specifically Indian phenomenon. "Caste began to loom large, until it became in our century a shorthand expression for Indian society at large: Indian society is caste."

The inequalities of the modern caste system and the fissures in Hindu society resulting from it are too well-known to need elaboration. The caste system is so pervasive that it has become a feature of life of all religious groups that live in India. At least, that was the case when first contact with Europeans took place. Thus it is not surprising that caste and Hinduism have often been equated. Sir Denzil Ibbetson wrote of the "popular and currently received theory of caste" (which he would go on to challenge) as consisting of three main articles:

(1) that caste is an institution of the Hindu religion, and wholly peculiar to that religion alone;

(2) that it consists primarily of a fourfold classification of people in general under the heads of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra.

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(3) that caste is perpetual and immutable, and has been transmitted from generation to generation throughout the ages of Hindu history and myth without the possibility of change.[3]

Caste in medieval India and the "social liberation" theory

The state of society and social stratification in medieval India is of necessity harder to understand than that of modern India. Since Hindu religious texts are usually studied to get information about "classical" India, that is India before Hindu society came into very direct contact with others such as the Islamic society, the source materials for caste in medieval times are usually the chronicles of history, whose focus is not on social conditions but on the notable personages and momentous events of history. The vast corpus of historical materials can, of course, still be used to get much information about the caste structures within Indian society. However, an examination of this material has been coloured by the assumption that the most important consideration in the Indo-Islamic encounter was the caste system, and that Islamic conquests in India were specifically motivated by an urge to eliminate caste from Indian society. The evolution of castes in medieval India is often pieced together by looking at the state of castes in what we may call 'modern India' (by which we mean here India as the British ethnographers found or thought it to be).

The existence of caste within Hindu society is easy to explain – mention of caste exists in scriptures, and manuals of social behaviour. Caste in Hindu society persists in modern times; the institution of caste must have continuously existed since ancient times. The existence of caste in medieval times thus needs no demonstration. In modern times, the caste system, or at any rate, *a* caste system, exists even among Indian Muslims. But as many a scholar does, its genesis is ascribed *solely* to Hindu influence:

> The Muslim caste system is a result of Hindu influence; the Indian Muslims have acquired the system, ..., from the Hindus through constant and continuous culture contact; the system of caste groupings itself resulted in the concept of social distance between the two communities, the Hindus and the Muslims.[4]

It is often assumed that there was no place for a concept related to caste in Islamic society, and hence any caste-like structures in Indian Muslim society must be the result of accretions or borrowings from the ambient Hindu society, or customs inherited from pre-Islamic times.

The background for this sweeping claim can to a large extent be explained by the observations of Marc Gaborieau. In his book, *Ni Brahmanes Ni Ancêtres*, the author presents his detailed findings, after several years of field work in Nepal, studying the Curauṯe, a caste of bangle-makers.

Writing about the dominant trend in British ethnography, Gaborieau claims that the British took a simplistic view of castes and presented Hinduism, taken as a whole, as inherently hierarchical in structure, as opposed to Islam, taken as a whole, taken to be inherently egalitarian.[5,6] Any elements of hierarchy in Islamic society is taken to be a relic from Hinduism, just as Ansari has done in the quote above. This idea has become very strongly rooted in the literature on caste. This idea has been championed particularly by Muslim scholars in the 19th century, as they defended their faith against criticism by Western scholars. The basic thrust of these arguments was that far from bringing about forcible conversions as accused of by the British, the Muslim conquerors carried out peaceful conversions, notably by means of the Sufis. The chief reason for its success would have been the particular attractiveness of Islam, as an egalitarian faith, for the lower castes especially the untouchables. The cities and *qaṣba* established by the new conquerors would have been spaces of liberty; they would have permitted the most disfavored people to rise in the social hierarchy, by opening new economic outlets.

Gaborieau points out that the best example of this theory is the book by Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, for which the author collaborated with two influential Indian Muslim thinkers, Sayyid Ahmad Khân (d. 1898) and Shiblî Nu'manî (d. 1914). The book, which was written in Aligarh and was first published in 1896, says among other things: "A Hindu will naturally be attracted by a religion which receives everybody without discrimination" (Arnold, 1965, 291-291); and: "It is this absence of class prejudice which constitutes the real force of Islam in India and which allows it to win so many converts from Hinduism" (pp. 118-119).

In Arnold's book we clearly see the formulations of a theme that had been or would be elaborated by many other scholars, such W.W. Hunter[7] and James Rice. In the context of conversions to Islam in Bengal, Rice wrote that the Islamic armies "were welcomed by the out-cast *Chandals* and *Kaibarrta*."[8]

An extreme formulation of this thesis can be found in the writings of Mohammad Habib. He is said to have "used the principles of

Dialectical Materialism to explain the role of Islam in India and world history."[1] One of Habib's quotes sums up the idea that medieval Muslim rule in India involved considerations of urban labour, and the preference of Indian workers for the new religious law:

> Face to face with the social and economic provisions of the *Shari 'at* and the Hindu Smritis as practical alternative, the Indian city-worker preferred the *Shari'at*. And the decision of the city worker was decisive.[10]

The conquest of Delhi by Mu'izz al-din ibn Sam Ghuri, who dethroned Prithviraj Chauhan was explained as "a revolution of Indian city labour led by the Ghorian Turks".[11] But the real target that is aimed at in the words "Hindu Smritis" becomes clear when Habib offers an explanation for the spectacular military success of the Ghurid Turks in displacing the Hindu Rajputs as masters of Delhi, and ultimately of the Indo-Gangetic plain:

> The Ghurian conquest of Northern India, when all factors are kept in mind, can be explained by *one fact only – the caste system* (emphasis added) and all that it entails; the degeneration of the oppressor and the degeneration of the oppressed, priest-craft, king-craft, idol-worship with its degrading cults, the economic and spiritual exploitation of the multitude, the division of the people into small water-tight subcaste groups resulting in the total annihilation of any sense of common citizenship or of loyalty to the country as a whole.[12]

Habib's ideas specifically targeting the caste system have not only been amplified by writers such as Nizami and Irfan Habib, but have also acquired legitimacy, based on repetition if not on substantiation.[13]

The theory of "social liberation" or "urban revolution" is often invoked especially in constructing the history of parts of the subcontinent which have Muslim majorities, such as Punjab, Sindh, Kashmir and Bengal. This idea has become one of the cornerstones of historiography in the new states of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and in Kashmir. Any qualifications or modifications to this theory will thus call into question the received histories of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, spanning over a period of more than a millennium.

Caste among Indian Muslims

In the face of numerous claims for the absence of caste in Islamic societies, it could be expected that modern Muslim society in India would be free of inequalities sanctioned by birth. However, it turns out that such is not at all the case. No less a man than Dr. B. R. Ambedkar took cognizance of the existence of castes even in Muslim Bengal.[14] Quoting the Superintendent of the Census for 1901 for the province of Bengal, Ambedkar noted:

> "The conventional division of the Mahomedans into four tribes – Sheikh, Saiad, Moghul and Pathan – has very little application to this Province (Bengal). The Mahomedans themselves recognize two main social divisions, (1) Ashraf or Sharaf and (2) Ajlaf. Ashraf means 'noble' and includes all undoubted descendants of foreigners and converts from high caste Hindus. All other Mahomedans including the occupational groups and all converts of lower ranks, are known by the contemptuous terms, 'Ajlaf', 'wretches' or 'mean people': they are also called Kamina or Itar, 'base' or Rasil, a corruption of Rizal, 'worthless'. In some places a third class, called Arzal or 'lowest of all,' is added. With them no other Mahomedan would associate, and they are forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground.
>
> "Within these groups there are castes with social precedence of exactly the same nature as one finds among the Hindus.[15]

Bengal would become the seat of intense political activism and lobbying in the years after Ambedkar wrote these words. Caste would become a much talked-of political commodity, politicians would campaign for the loyalties of the masses, the province would go on to be partitioned, and yet even as late as 1973, caste would be an abiding feature of Bengali Muslim life. M.K.A. Siddiqui, who contributed an essay[16] to an important book on the caste phenomenon among Indian Muslims,[17] points out that there are several caste groups among the Muslims in Calcutta. Siddiqui discusses several different ways in which inequality manifests itself – restrictions on commensality, hypergamy, pollution by contact, etc. He divides the castes into three categories. The castes in any one category can accept food from the others in the category, but not from castes in lower categories.

The Dafalis who work as priests for the Lal Begis, or the Qalanders who sometimes live in their neighbourhood, refuse to accept food or water from Lal Begis.[18]

The groups are descent groups, "with or without occupational specialization". For example, the Lal Begis (who roughly correspond to the Bhangi caste in Hindu society) are generally regarded as unclean on account of their humble occupation – "they often experience difficulty in getting their dead buried in the common Muslim burial ground." Hypergamy is widely practiced in the highest category, meaning that women from lower castes can be married into the higher castes (Sayyad and Sheikh), but not vice versa. The children of these mixed marriages are called "Sayyadzada" and "Sheikhzada" respectively. They do not attain the full status of their fathers, and are expected to make alliances with people of their status.

Siddiqui regards the emphasis on birth as not being sanctioned by scripture, which he says, wiped out distinctions of colour and race. However, as Islam spread to distant lands, social stratification resulted as a result of historical developments and adjustments made to local traditions. Kinship with the Prophet became a new criterion of nobility. Siddiqui discusses a few other aspects of the caste structure, and, significantly notes that "the founders of the [Sufi] mystic orders belong exclusively to categories that claim foreign origin. Most of them are Sayyads."

The situation in Bengal was similar to that in central regions of India, as shown in studies by Zarina Bhatty[19] and by Imtiaz Ahmad. Bhatty studied the case of a village Kasauli in the state of Uttar Pradesh, and found the village society to be deeply caste-riven. At the top of the hierarchy was a lineage of Sayyads, and a subcaste of the Sheikhs, namely the Kidwais. These were the only *Ashraf* castes in the village. Elsewhere in India, the *Ashraf* castes include Sayyids, Sheikhs, Mughals and Pathans. These are communities claiming descent from population groups hailing from outside India. Bhatty points out that all four noble castes permit interdining, but commensality with the lower castes, consisting of groups descended from Indian converts, is not allowed. Also Sayyads and Sheikhs intermarry, but marriages between Sayyads and Sheikhs on the one hand, and Mughals and Pathans on the other, are not socially acceptable. In the village of Kasauli, there are eighteen other castes, consisting of groups defined by occupation. Closely linked to occupation is a notion of pollution, depending on the materials handled by persons following the occupation. A kind of hierarchy is defined, with castes which come into proximity with the *Ashraf* regarded as higher.

> Nats, who skin dead animals and make drums, find a place close to the bottom of the scale while Julahas and Darzis are at the top end. Dhobis, who must wash soiled clothes, are closer to the Nats than to the Julahas.[20]

Bhatty discusses the interesting case of a divide in the musician community. The *Mirasis* who perform for the higher *Ashraf* castes, are regarded as superior to the Nats, who perform the same social functions, but for the public at large. The *Mirasis* have adopted the dress of the *Ashraf*, and have learned to speak Urdu, while the Nats converse in the local dialect. Thus the *Mirasis* have improved their social standing by the imitation of and association with the upper castes, who set the norms for the whole society.

In his article on the Siddique Sheikhs of Uttar Pradesh, Imtiaz Ahmed informs us of the various considerations taken into account when determining hierarchy within the status group called the Sheikhs. There are at least four of them:

a) affiliation with an Arab tribe.
b) descent from a person of Arab origin who is known to have close ties to the Prophet.
c) relationship to a place in Arabia or Persia.
d) descent from someone who is said to have entered India along with the early Muslim armies.

According to Ahmed, the Sheikh subgroups emphasize their foreign origin and links to some Islamic personage of repute. The groups who claim to be descended from the Prophet's own tribe, Quraish, are regarded as the highest. Then follow the descendants of first Caliph, Abu Bakr Siddique. Next in rank are those who count the next two Caliphs, Usman and Umar among their ancestors. They are followed by descendants of the close friends and associates of the Prophet. Descendants of other Persians or Arabs who may have come with the Muslim armies are ranked last.

As for the Siddique Sheikhs studied closely by Imtiaz Ahmed, they have only recently been 'recognized' as descendants of Abu Bakr. Their Kayastha Hindu antecedents are quite well established, and their striving for recognition as *Ashraf* is a phenomenon quite well known all over India. Ahmed points out that the circumstances of the Siddique Sheikhs' conversion is not known, but after conversion to Islam,

> *they were allowed to retain their traditional occupation as land recordkeepers*, a fact which is also attested to by the fact that the members of the caste also served as patwaris well after the annexation of the area by the British. (emphasis added)

Ahmed makes some other very interesting observations about the Siddique Sheikhs:

> Convert groups to Islam are generally characterized as New Muslims and they are looked down upon by the social groups

> which are known to be descendants of foreign sources or who have succeeded in eliminating the stigma of recent conversion. This gave rise to certain differentiations in the adjustment of the Sheikh Siddiques after their conversion to Islam in the different villages. In villages that were largely or predominantly Hindu, the Sheikh Siddiques were excluded from the framework of interaction with the Hindu castes but they continued to enjoy a somewhat superior status as a Muslim group. But in villages where there were numerous other Muslim groups of superior status, the Sheikh Siddiques were not merely excluded from the social hierarchy of Hindu castes, but were also relegated to a somewhat lower position even within the hierarchy of Muslim castes.

The continued prestige of the Siddique Sheikhs in their native villages even after conversion can probably be explained by the fact that they were already a community which enjoyed prestige among the Hindus. After all, they *were allowed to retain their prestigious occupation as land recordkeepers.* But in Muslim-dominated villages, the Siddique Sheikhs commanded little prestige among the Muslims, since they were not *Ashrâf.* This is an example of conversion from Hinduism which has obviously not been motivated by a desire to escape the disabilities of the Hindu caste system.

Ahmed's observations regarding the inferior status of "New Muslims" seems to be applicable widely in India. We find confirmation of this generalization in places as far removed from Uttar Pradesh as the Moplah-dominated regions of Kerala. The hierarchies in Moplah society have been studied by Victor D'Souza.[21] He reports that there are five distinct sections among the Moplahs: Thanghals, Arabis, Malbaris, Pusalars and Ossans. The Thangals who are at the top of the pyramid, are a small group of people who trace their descent to the Prophet, through his daughter Fatima. The term Thangal is a respectful term of address, usually applied to Brahmins in Kerala. The Arabis are a group of people mostly concentrated in Quilandy (a town north of Calicut), who are descendants of Arab men and local women, but who have preserved the memory of their descent. The association of the Arabis with Arabia entitles them to a respect in Moplah society second only to that of the Thangals. The Malabaris also claim descent from Arabs, but they are those who followed a matriarchal system – the so-called "mother-right" culture. As for the Pusalars and the Ossans, D'Souza writes:

> The so-called Pusalars are converts from among the Hindu fishermen, called Mukkuvans. Their conversion took place relatively late. Because of their latter conversion and their low occupation of fishing they are allotted a low status in the Moplah society. The Pusalars are spread all along the coastline of Kerala and they still continue their traditional occupation of fishing.
>
> The Ossans are a group of barbers among the Moplahs and by virtue of their very low occupation they are ranked the lowest. Their womenfolk act as hired singers on social occasions like weddings.

The hierarchies in Moplah society also show a tendency to accord the highest place of honour to the Sayyads, and lowest place to new converts and despised groups, such as barbers. The motive for conversion could hardly have been the keen desire to escape the disabilities of the Hindu caste system. This point has also been made by Richard Eaton, who noted that the lower castes in India could hardly have been familiar with the writings of Rousseau or Jefferson, and thus possessed of a notion of the fundamental equality of all men. Also, for the larger part of the Hindu-Muslim encounter, Muslims have judged Hindu society on theological grounds, not on social grounds, contrasting Hindu polytheism with Islamic monotheism.[22] The realities of Indian Muslim society flatly contradict claims such as the one made by the renowned Islamic thinker, and rector of Nadwatul Ulema, Shiblî Nu‘manî:

> If an Asiatic converts to Christianity, he does not obtain the rights (*h̲uqûq*) of the European community (*qaum*), even though he may have the same religion; even on the plane of religious rights, he cannot be equal (*ham-sar*) to the Europeans. In contrast, the "communitarian identity" (*qaumiyyat*) of the Muslims is not bound to the country, nor to the race (*nasal*), nor to lineage, nor to any other criterion – it is only bound to religion. Whether one is Persian (*‘ajamî*), Indian (*hindî*), European or Asiatic, as soon as one enters the Muslim community, by the sole fact of conversion, one immediately (*daf‘atan*) becomes the equal (*barâbar*) of other Muslims in rights: As soon as he has pronounced the profession of the faith, a tanner (*Camâr*) can take a place in the first row in the mosque, thus putting himself on a rank equal to that of the [Ottoman] Sultan ’Abd al-Hamid Khân; the Sultan cannot

> then claim to dislodge him from that place (cited in Shams-i-Tabrîz Khân, 1983, 58-59).[23]

Gaborieau points out that this ideal picture of Muslim society fails to correspond with reality. Nu'manî aimed to fight Western scholars with their arguments. He wished to show that while conversion to Christianity did not guarantee the Asiatics racial equality with Europeans, such was not the case within Muslim society. Muslim society, in Nu'manî's romantic view, was even ahead of the Christian West. However, Gaborieau points out that equality did not fall to the lot even of Nu'manî himself :

> His immense learning was recognized the world over: but he lacked any mystic aura. Most importantly, he was descended from converts; and what is worse, his lineage lacked prestige locally. He was a pseudo-Rajput, in fact, from an obscure caste of peasants. He was perfectly conscious of this stigma. This is what led him, like Iqbal, to overemphasize learning and the role of Islam, and to be extremely determined to exact the mark of respect due to him in the capacity of scholar. He never succeeded in gaining admittance into the intellectual and religious establishment of the day. He was not able to establish himself in the two prestigious institutions where he taught, (Aligarh and the Nadwatu'l-'ulamâ' of Lucknow) which had been founded by genuine Sayyids and were populated with Ashrâf; in both cases he had to resign (Metcalf, 1982a, 340-342).[24]

As we have seen before, scholars such as Ansari regard manifestations of societal inequality within Islamic society as an inheritance from Hinduism. In regions where the demographics have not shifted in favour of Islam, the influence from the ambient Hindu society on the Muslim minority is indeed strong. However, the practice of segregating the lower castes has continued in regions where Hindu political power, and possibly Hindu demographic preponderance, has long vanished. As discussed before, in the case of Bengal, castes like the Lal Begis have been discriminated against long after the majority of the population turned Muslim.

Matters were hardly different at the other end of the Indian subcontinent, in Baluchistan. The Census Superintendent of Baluchistan wrote in 1931 that members of the Chuhra caste or tribe, who identified themselves variously as Hindu Balmiki, Hindu Lal Begi, Musalman Lal Begi, Musalman Balashai, Sikh Mazhabi or simply as 'Chuhra' were 'without exception ... not allowed to drink from wells belonging to real Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs' and were 'not permitted to enter their places of worship'.[25]

The disabilities inflicted on the lower castes in Kerala's Muslim (and of course Hindu) society also continued in the Laccadive Islands, after the islands' link with Hindu society had been severed. The caste hierarchies prevailing in the islands have been studied in some detail by Leela Dube, one more contributor to the book edited by Imtiaz Ahmed. The aristocracy, called Karnavars are descendants of Nambudiris and Nayars. They are also referred to by the respectful appellation, Koya, which means a religious dignitary. It was this class that monopolized land- and boat-owning. The Malumis or Urukkars formed the sailor-caste, and the Melacheris (literally, tree-climbers) formed a class of serfs, who earned their livelihood by "plucking coconuts, tilling their lords' lands, rowing their boats." The number of castes or classes varied from island to island, some places having four instead of three. One island, Agatti, was regarded as a Melacheri island.

In view of evidence such as has been adduced above, Gaborieau argues that a hierarchical ordering is quite characteristic of Islamic society. He points out that Hindu society is not unique in holding some occupations in ritual opprobrium :

The influence of the Indian context is often invoked to explain the opprobrium suffered by the barber, the weaver, the butcher, the tanner, the sweeper[26], etc. These are professions stigmatized as being low and even impure. The last two are even regarded as untouchable. But this interpretation is short-sighted: the Hindu ideology only confirms prejudices formerly more widespread spread throughout the world. The tanner who handles animal carcasses is universally detested; the H̲ajjâm who is the scarifier (and, among the Muslims, the circumcizer), as well as the barber are looked down upon in the Talmud as well as under the Sassanians, among Hindus and among Muslims. The contempt towards weavers also dates to remote times. Here we are dealing with traditions which date back to prehistoric times and can be found very different civilizations (for all these questions, see the important documentation analyzed by Brunschvig, 1962, 46-57.) This fact demolishes the contrary argument according to which Islam in India is supposed to have rehabilitated the depressed castes – the professions which are cited as examples, the barbers, weavers, and tanners, are precisely those whose inferior status is most explicitly affirmed in the Islamic tradition. The stereotypes attached to them in India are widely attested in Islam and in the most ancient traditions: the barber is greedy and arrogant; the weaver – wretched, stupid and treacherous. The conversion to Islam of those who practiced these professions unquestionably opened for them new economic outlets – and this is precisely the reason for their conversion; their conversion in no way improved their status.[27]

In addition to the material already available in the literature, Gaborieau brings to the discussion the results of his own long years of field work in Nepal. He has seen Muslim Curautes redoing their ritual ablutions if they happened to touch a [Muslim] untouchable by mistake. He has also studied the phenomenon of ritual uncleanness associated with some professions, and social hierarchy based on profession, at work in Muslim society. One of his examples concerns the Kashmiri Muslims in Nepal who pass for *Ashrâf.* Periodically, these high born Muslims send for a barber from India, at great expense. However, the barber becomes wealthy, and turns his back on the profession in favour of something more respectable. He refuses to perform circumcisions, and the need for another barber is acutely felt. A new barber is sent for, and he is despised in turn; he faces the same stereotypes, and the cycle is repeated. The stereotypes, applied to barbers and weavers, are an old Islamic tradition.

While individual social mobility is attested, collective mobility is virtually impossible, because there is a kind of "barrier" separating the *Ashraf* castes from the artisan castes:

Nowhere have I sensed this barrier as strongly as in my field work in Nepal. The oldest Ashrâf of Kathmandu, the Kashmiri, traditionalists and devoted to the cult of the saints, totally refuse all socially significant transactions with other Muslims of low status from the valley, who are collectively called Hindustânî and who are recruited from various artisan castes. At the most they sometimes accept, under the rubric of hypergamy, some of their daughters as secondary wives who are never any more than concubines. A primary marriage would be unthinkable. The Kashmiris have always been opposed, even in multiple proceedings in front of Nepalese tribunals composed of Hindus, to having common mosques and even a common cemetery with the Hindustânî. This is a clinching argument when we remember that the total number of Muslims in the valley does not ever exceed twelve hundred persons. The Hindustânî may well be reformed, instructed in religion and devout, they can never cross the barrier (Gaborieau, 1977a, 52-54).[28]

Gaborieau's studies of conversions into the Muslim Curaute caste contradict the theory that conversion has taken place in India selectively from the lowest orders. The Curauṯe admit conversions into their caste from Hindus of higher castes such as Chettri and Gurung. But they do *not* accept untouchables into their caste.

Indeed even conversion effected by the Sufis does not seem to wipe out the stigma of untouchability. Gaborieau points out that the Ashrâf monopolize the so-called orthodox Sufi brotherhoods (*bâ-shar'*), as opposed to the "heterodox" brotherhoods (*be-shar'*) who are relegated to the level of the lowest castes (Gaborieau, 1986c)[29]and also that the heterodox brotherhoods are lower than and subservient to the former, so much so that the musicians (*qawwâl*), who pronounce the mystic chants (*qawwâlî*) and play the drum, are in fact untouchable musicians (as in the Hindu temples) even though they claim affiliation with a Sufi order. The heterodox Sufis and these musicians are relegated to the far corners of the shrines dedicated to Muslim saints.[30]

During his fieldwork in Nepal, Gaborieau found that the membership in the orthodox Sufi brotherhoods was restricted to the *Ashraf*. Rural artisans of low rank did not even know of the existence of the orthodox brotherhoods, since they only dealt with intermediaries like the Madari. The situation was identical in the Sufi hospices of Bihar, as indicated by the research of another scholar (Lehmann).[31]

A caste-like phenomenon exists in the Punjab with the Chishtis forming a hereditary clan, controlling not only the tomb of their ancestor Baba Farîd-ud-dîn (d. 1265) at Pak-pattan, but also the lands and the cultivators surrounding it.[32] Clan members had justified their hypergamous codes of marriages even in front of British courts. The noted historian Richard Eaton rejected these claims as being contrary to Islamic tradition, and as reflecting the influence of the ambient Hindu culture. Gaborieau, however, points out that such hypergamous traditions are completely in consonance with worldwide Islamic practice. According to Gaborieau, Robert Brunschvig (1962, 55) had long ago compared the laws of the Manu Smriti to Islamic tradition:

> If a young girl likes a man of a class higher than her own, the king should not make her pay the slightest fine; but if she unites herself with a man of inferior birth, she should be imprisoned in her house, and placed under guard. A man of low origin who courts a maiden of high birth deserves a capital punishment. (*Laws of Manu* (VIII, 365-366))

Following Brunschvig, Gaborieau claims that this law is exactly that which the dominant Hanafite tradition of jurisprudence would require,[33] as has been spelled out on in the famous compendium of the Moghul period titled *Fatâwâ-i-'âlamgîriyya*. The idea that a woman can only marry a man of equal or higher status has been upheld as late as the twentieth century by scholars even of the eminence of Ashraf

'Alî Thânawî (d. 1943). The marriage of a woman to a man of lower status can be annulled by the family's request, or by a *Qâẕî's* judgment.

Gaborieau calls for a frankness in studying the phenomenon of caste in Indian Muslim society. The Muslims who entered did not seem to be shocked by the institution of caste, and if they were not shocked by it, it must be that they were not unfamiliar with such arrangements themselves. Even writers such as Ansari who trace the caste inequalities in Indian Muslim society to Hindu influence, admit however that Islam was not egalitarian when it entered India.

> The ideal of equality among Muslims was practicable only in the then prevailing conditions of Arabia. In the course of the expansion of Islam and its contact with other complex cultures the democratic forms of political organization and social equality within the community gradually disappeared.[34]

Ansari then traces the origin of caste to the "Indo-Iranian community". He declares that though "Islam proclaimed the message of equality and universal brotherhood", "the established and deep rooted institution of social segregation in Persia" eventually won out.

Even the reputed Muslim scholars of Persia, like Nasîr-ud-Dîn at-Tûsî preached the division of society; his classification of society remained the same as it was during the Sasanian period. In his book, *Akhlâq-i-Nasîrî* (which was finished shortly before the fall of the Caliphate), at-Tûsî considers that each of the social classes should be kept in its proper place. A seventeenth-century work, *Jâmi-i-Mufidi*, again retains the same four-fold division of society, but it puts forward a slight change in giving precedence to warriors at the top and reducing the relative rank of priests to that of second in the hierarchy. In addition to these philosophers, the noted statesman of Persia, Nizam-ul-Mulk, in his *Siyasat Nama*, instructs his subordinates to maintain the people in their proper ranks.[35]

The idea of social hierarchy, Ansari says, had already become part of Islamic society by the time it entered India in the twelfth century. Over the centuries attitudes only hardened, until at last even untouchability entered Islamic society. The plight of Muslim untouchables is described by Ansari in moving detail:

A Bhangi, either Muslim or non-Muslim, is not permitted to enter a mosque no matter how clean he may be at the time. Although in theory a Muslim Bhangi or Chamar is allowed to offer his prayer[s] in a mosque, but in usual practice their entrance into such pious places as mosques and shrines of Muslim saints is socially disapproved and thus it is resisted. Even if they could get into a mosque or shrine, provided they have had a bath and are dressed in clean clothes, they do not usually proceed beyond the entrance steps. In contrast to the Hindu caste system, Muslim Bhangis are allowed to learn the Quran, but they are not expected to teach it.

It is a common practice observed in almost all the households of *Ashrâf*, Muslim Rajputs, and the clean occupational castes, that Bhangis, either Muslim or non-Muslim, are generally served food in their own containers. If they do not have their own bowls they are served in clay pots which are not again used to serve clean caste members. Bhangis are given water to drink in such a way that the jar does not touch even their lips.[36]

However Ansari does not explain how caste structures in India can be attributed to Hindu influence alone, if Muslim society had also stratified into hierarchies, before Islam's advent in India.

Several such problems in the literature need explanation. Gaborieau again offers perspective:

> ... While we have good contemporary studies of Hindu untouchables, no work was done on Muslim untouchables during the colonial period. The absence of work on this key point deserves reflection. This refusal to consider the reality is understandable on the part of Muslim scholars; the problem of untouchability clashes against their ideological convictions on the ecumenical character of Islam. And what is more, any conversion even of untouchables involves burning political complications. On the part of western researchers, this omission is less excusable: I regard it as a manifestation of the prejudice according to which Muslim social order must necessarily obey a different logic than the Hindu social order, and also by the illusion of believing that the enumeration of castes is done from top down, whereas in reality it happens from the bottom up, starting from the untouchables.[37]

Gaborieau also explains that advent of Islam did not spell the demise of hierarchical structures in Indian society. The Muslims allowed the hierarchical structures to remain, and were not even shocked by it; not only that, they occupied the apex of the pyramid (in the form of the Ashraf castes), without otherwise undermining it.[38]

As an example from the 1921 census, we can look at the caste-wise break-up of the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities in the northwestern province of Punjab. It will be seen that the very lowest castes (Chamars (leather-workers) and Chuharas (scavengers/sweepers) did not convert to Islam at all.

Major Castes Common to Hindu/Muslim/Sikhs in Punjab (Census of India Punjab 1921, Part II, p. 132.)[39]

Caste		*Religion*	
	Hindu	*Muslim*	*Sikh*
Jat	10,35,405	25,82,495	18,22,881
Rajput	4,49,251	2,18,319	32,579
Gujjars	1,51,959	4,65,676	-
Saini	66,359	-	52,888
Kamboh	-	76,829	64,194
Khatri	3,90,253	-	61,234
Arora	5,91,230	-	1,16,175
Sunar	77,251	28,798	-
Tarkhan	1,61,833	3,12,125	1,39,327
Kumhar	1,55,879	3,83,952	-
Lohar	83,385	2,17,459	-
Nai	1,06,720	2,18,319	32,579
Jhinwar	2,15,210	36,720	48,456
Julaha	56,593	5,79,404	-
Chamar	9,52,329	-	1,61,862
Chuharas	6,89,662	-	40,345

Other difficulties with the "social liberation theory"

The idea that the lower castes have preferentially converted to Islam as an escape from caste oppression has led to the overlooking or under-emphasis of many observed facts:

(i) If the lower castes had changed faith in order to seek relief from oppression, there would be no question of them continuing to honour their oppressors, the upper castes, after conversion. Yet there are several instances of the converted people continuing to be deferential to the upper castes, especially the Brahmans. As an example we may take the observation made by an early missionary in Bengal, during the first half of the nineteenth century. The missionary was informed by the headman of a Muslim village "that Muhammad was a Bengali, born in the house of a Brahmin."[40] The spiritual and social prestige of the Brahmans clearly persisted even after the conversion of the population to Islam.

(ii) The existence of Hindu customs among the converts has been widely reported, as in the book *Qanoon-e-Islam*, by Jafar Sharif, written in the first half of the eighteenth century. The mention of the existence of several peculiarly Indian or Hindu customs prevalent among the

Muslims of India is not in itself surprising, but sometimes it gives evidence of the continued attachment of the *converted* lower castes to the *unconverted* upper castes. As one example we may cite the case of the prevalence of astrology among Indian Muslims. Whereas upper Muslim castes used the services of a Muslim astrologer to cast horoscopes for marriage, the lower Muslim castes (like the Bhat, Dafali and Gujar) employed *pandits* for making horoscopes and also for prescribing auspicious days for ceremonies.[41]

(iii) Several *high caste* converts have continued not only to retain their pre-conversion privileges, but also to insist on it, and enforce it on the *lower castes*, whether the latter converted or not. Such is the case with the Muslim Meo Rajputs, as studied by Raymond Jamous. The Meos regard themselves as a high caste, and this claim is admitted by the rest of the society, which is partly Muslim. In Meo villages, some of the 'service castes' (*kamin jati*), low in status, consist of Muslims. Among them are barbers, washermen, bards and funeral priests or fakirs. Others like potters, jewelers and untouchable groups are Hindus. The high caste Meo maintain separate residential quarters and cemeteries from the lower caste Muslims. Here we see all the stereotyped arguments flounder against the facts: the most influential converts are upper-caste; the lower castes who have converted have not been raised in status; the very lowest castes, most susceptible to oppression, have not converted at all.[42]

(iv) While the disabilities suffered by the so-called 'lower castes' among the Hindus is well-attested historically, the claim that their conversions always entailed an improved status in the new society they entered into, is a matter of conjecture. Sometimes it is contradicted by known historical facts, as in this excerpt from James Wise's account of the Muslims of east Bengal:

> the Bediyas were outcaste Hindus thirty years ago [ca. 1850], but a Mulla now ministers to them, circumcision is practised, the Ramzan fast is kept up and the regular prayers offered up; but they cannot enter the public mosque or find a place in the public graveyard. From a social point of view they are still aliens with whom no gentleman will associate or eat. The treatment of the Chandal by the Sudra is in no respect more rigorous or harsh than that of the Bediyas by the upper ranks of Muhammadans.[43]

Caste as reflected in medieval chronicles

It has been argued before that the medieval historical chronicles do not specifically focus on the problem of caste, since they are not the works of sociologists or ethnographers, and since their purpose is to report on historical events, and the deeds of the personages they are centred upon. Yet it is often possible to glean much information about the relative positions of the castes, and their reasons for participating in the often turbulent events in the manner that they did. To the extent that anything can be said about caste at all, the facts totally contradict the dominant theory of "social liberation", as enunciated by Habib and Nizami. In the early days of the Sultanate in Delhi, during the reign of Qutb al-dîn Mubârak Khaljî, a Hindu of the 'low' Parwârî caste named Khusrau Khan (presumably after conversion to Islam), rebelled against the king, deposed him and ascended the throne, to the joy of the Hindu masses, as recorded by contemporary Muslim historians.[44] The Parwârîs profited from a general revolt which spread to some members of the Hindu nobility as well. They reinstated the privileged position of the Brahmans, for the limited period they were in power. Interestingly, the poet Amir Khusrau confirms that the Hindu noblemen who rebelled against the king had Chandals and Meos among their retainers.[45] Thus, to the extent that Amir Khusrau's work can be regarded as historically sound, it actually supports the contention that the lowest castes were among those who opposed Muslim rule.

Foreign travelers visiting India in medieval times have left behind some observations, which do not support the contention that Indian Muslim society was immune to considerations of caste. Bernier's remark bears this out: "No one marries but in his own trade or profession; and this custom is observed almost as rigidly by *Mahometans* as by the *Gentiles*... Many are the beautiful girls thus doomed to live singly, girls who might marry advantageously if their parents would connect them with a family less noble than their own."[46]

When the most enduring of Muslim empires in North India was finally challenged, caste considerations did play a role, but not one that the dominant theory of "social liberation" would suggest. During the Sikh rebellion, after the death of the tenth spiritual preceptor, Guru Gobind Singh Dev, the mantle of leadership fell upon Banda Bahadur, whose cause became a magnet not only for the Jat peasantry, but also for members of such lower castes and untouchable groups as scavengers and leather-workers.[47]

> The Sikh rebellion was a dramatic testimonial to severe disaffection in the provinces of north India. ...*The Muslim chroniclers all decry the ascendance of low-castes or even untouchable Hindus to positions of power* (emphasis added).

Earlier medieval historians writing in Persian do not seem to take account of the differences within Hindus society. The only caste to be mentioned specifically is that of the Brahmans, though they are mentioned in their capacity as religious leaders among the Hindus. Occasionally, however, the other castes are mentioned, but rarely in a favourable light, as in the case of "the proselytization programme of Shâh Walî-Allâh [which] only included the leaders of the Hindû community. The low class of infidels, according to him, were to be left alone to work in the fields and for paying *jizya*. They, like beats of burden and agricultural livestock, were to be kept in abject misery and despair."[48]

Comparison of Caste Structures in Hindu Society and other societies

Even scholars who admit that there are castes in Muslim society in India sometimes try to emphasize that it is somehow "different" from caste in Hindu society. Thus, for example, Lelyveld in his book *Aligarh's First Generation* introduces the concept of *sharîf* Muslim. He argues that "it would be a mistake to define the *ashrâf* (people who are sharîf) in terms of birth". But having said that, he immediately goes on to say:

> One usually acquired *sharâfat* by birth, however; if acquired in some other way, one's identity was quickly redefined in the vocabulary of honorable descent, which implied new bonds of kinship.[49]

There is a reluctance to admit that castes in Muslim society also depend on birth, or are justified on grounds of birth/heredity. Similarly, the Bangladeshi sociologist A.K. Nazmul Karim claims that "although there were caste tendencies among the Bengali Muslims, those would never become rigid castes on the Hindu model, because of the greater fluidity of the Islamic system." But elsewhere he himself admits that the *ashrâf* classes in Bengal "tried their utmost to maintain their caste-pride by practising a sort of endogamy among themselves and by abstaining from interdining or mixing on equal terms with the lower classes."[50] It was only after loss of power and privilege under British rule that they agreed to intermarry with the members of the rising Muslim middle class in order to maintain their standing in society.

> In some parts of Nadia, Jessore, Bakerganj, Dacca and Faridpur (these are all Districts in East Pakistan), lower classes would sometimes marry [in]to better class families on account of the prosperity of one and the poverty of the other. When these unequal or *ghair kufv* marriages take place, lower classes would assume such titles as Munshi, Mulla, Biswas, Jawardar, and are sometimes called *Atraf Bhalamanus* or 'an Atraf made a gentleman'."[51]

(Karim also traces the practice of permitting the marriages of women only to men only higher *kufv* (social status) to a Hadith of the Prophet. If this is indeed the case, it cannot be ascribed to Hindu influence.)[52]

Thus, the breakdown of caste notions in Muslim communities is probably because of the small size of nuclear Muslim communities which had to abandon caste notions in order to survive. Such adaptation is shown by expatriate Hindu communities in Mauritius, Guyana or Trinidad[53]. But even within India, population groups outside their traditional homeland become more relaxed in their caste practices. This was noticed by Sir Denzil Ibbetson already in 1881:

> Isolation from their fellows in a land of strangers binds them together in closer union. The Púrbi is a Púrbi to the people of the Panjáb, and nothing more; and in many cases this looseness of classification spreads to the people themselves, and they begin to class themselves as Púrbi and forget their original divisions.[54]

In order to make a fair comparison, Hindu societies in India should be compared to Muslim or other societies in their traditional homelands, and not to immigrant groups adapting to extenuating circumstances in other lands.

Caste in the Islamic World

We have already seen from the examples of the Ashraf's practices regarding marriage, or admittance to mystic brotherhoods, etc., the Ashraf also retained their own stereotypes and prejudices which cannot be traced solely to Hindu influence. But that is not the whole story. Even if the caste structure was largely a relic from the pre-Islamic past, new castes also sometimes came into existence. The Maratha Bugtis in Balochistan are an interesting case of what may be a caste forming even under Islamic rule. Theirs is a clan claiming descent from Marathas captives of war brought back by members of the Bugti tribe, who served the armies of Ahmad Shah Durrani (Abdali) after the fateful battle of Panipat.

In time they underwent 'Bugti-ization'and became Muslims. Although for all practical purposes they may now be considered Bugtis, and are even in the forefront in education and employment, they were once considered little better than bonded labour. They could not own or buy land. Up to two generations ago they could be 'bought' for twenty or thirty rupees. Their women were fair game for Bugtis.

The Maratha Bugtis took jobs as unskilled labourers, which their tribal overlords disdained. Over the years they have come to occupy higher positions, and their prosperity is resented by the Bugtis.[55] It is interesting to note that this caste-like phenomenon has endured for more than two centuries, even in a region largely devoid of Hindus.

The Maratha Bugtis were not alone in their position as a group living in the Islamic world, with their inferior position determined by heredity. To pick an example unrelated to the Indian subcontinent, we might consider the case of the Haratin[56] or Harratin of southwestern Morocco and Mauritania who are "a socially and ethnically distinct class of workers". They are descended from slaves, but are now serfs, "without the privileges of freedom".

The facile practice of regarding all hierarchies in the Islamic world as a substratum from pre-Islamic societies does not stand up even to the slightest scrutiny. Hierarchies (in other words, castes) exist even in places like Yemen and the rest of the Arabian peninsula. Charles Lindholm suggests that even "a cursory reading of Middle Eastern ethnography" would reveal the existence of caste phenomena:

> ... the Marri Baluch are called a caste society by their ethnographer (Pehrson 1966). As among the Pathans, the Baluch clearly mark off the lower orders of serfs, gypsies, smiths and musicians, while the group leader is regarded with religious awe as a being apart and holy. In Persia, the agricultural peoples of Kirman are divided into named endogamous groups within the framework of what looks very much like the Hindu varna system of priest/warrior-clerk/farmer. Once again, there is a set of polluted castes (English 1966). A similar situation is found in South Yemen, where the Brahmin-like holy men outrank among mediate hierarchic endogamous groups, bounded at the lowest level by a set of despised 'Untouchables' with whom commensality is not permitted. The ethnographer (Bujra 1971) has no qualms about calling this a caste society.[57]

A sociologist who studied social stratification in Iran in the twentieth century reported that in Kirman city there was a group ranked even lower than unskilled labourers, whose status is not only humble but defiling because of occupation or birth. Butchers, barbers, washers in public baths, leather tanners, privy cleaners, night soil collectors, and street scavengers are members of this lowest class. The Gypsies, for instance, are not allowed to touch food or water before use by other members of town society, despite the fact that they are Muslims, nor are they encouraged to settle in Kirman. Intermarriage with Gypsies or others of the defiled class is considered repugnant by elite and commoners alike. In some cases it is expressly forbidden.[58]

As a perusal of the informative entry on "Bedouin" in the Encyclopaedia Brittanica[59] reveals, Bedouin society in twentieth-century Arabia was also divided into various groups. While the nomads have been settled after the formation of the modern states, the societal hierarchical and patriarchal structure has been retained. The Bedouin tribes were classified on the basis of the species of animal on which they depended. Camel nomads were highest in prestige. They were spread on extensive territories in the Sahara, Syrian and Arabian deserts. Sheep- and goat-herding nomads, rank below, and live closer the cultivated zones in Jordan, Syria and Iraq. The noble tribes are proud of their ancestry, and are divided into "Qaysi" (northern Arabian) or "Yamani" groups. In addition to the noble elements, the Bedouin society also includes vassal tribes, which are "ancestorless" (i.e., tribes whose heredity is not prestigious). These groups are subservient to the noble tribes and include professional groups such as artisans, blacksmiths, entertainers, etc.

Caste-like phenomena are attested in other regions of the Arabian peninsula, even among the sedentary populations. Paul Dresch has studied the situation in Yemeni tribal society at the beginning of the twentieth century[60]. He observes that two groups of people are widely regarded as not belonging to the tribe, but are still endowed with rights and obligations. The first of them is the *Sayyids* – a group claiming descent from the prophet, and the *Qâḏî*s. (The *Qâḏî*s are also a group defined by heredity. While elsewhere in the Islamic world the title *Qâḏî* refers to judges, in Yemen it only denotes a member of this class, whether judge or not. The *Qâḏî*s or *mashaykh* are also said to be descended from the Prophet Hud. The *mashaykh* do not enjoy as much prestige as the *Sayyids*.[61]) Below the tribesmen rank the 'weak' people (*ḏua'fâ) (sing. ḏa'îf*). Weak people have no prestige. They include people of various trades, some respectable and some not so respectable.

> Artisans and merchants in the traditional towns tend to be highly organized into castelike guild groups that are ranked largely according to the nature of their craft. In many areas

> those who ply so-called respectable trades are sharply differentiated from the *bani khoms*, or sons of the five, practitioners of the five despised trades of barber, bloodletter, butcher, bath attendant, and tanner. In the Hadramaut artisans who handle clay, such as masons and potters, also fall into the despised group, as do sweepers, fishermen, and some others, depending on locality. Poor farm laborers also occupy a low status, but it is higher than those of the despised crafts.
>
> The *akhdam*, in many areas the lowest group, are so isolated from society that they have been compared with the untouchables of India. Found especially along the Tihama coast and in southern Yemen (Sana) but also in the Hadramaut, they are often distinguished socially by their negroid appearance and often follow the despised trade of sweeper. The *akhdam* appear to be descendants of slaves, although not all former slaves occupy such degraded positions. Slavery existed in the territories of the Aden Protectorate until the 1930s and persisted in Yemen (Sana) until 1962.[62]

It would thus seem that the practice of forming hierarchical structures is a phenomenon, quite widespread even outside India. In fact, not only hierarchies, but the specific practice of untouchability is attested in Burma and Japan. The idea of pollution by contact is attested in Qajar Iran, to cite but a single example.[63] An exhaustive comparative study of all the different phenomena that are usually subsumed under the notion of caste is yet to be undertaken. *Homo hierarchichus* is not endemic only to India; *Homo sapiens* everywhere has mostly been *Homo hierarchicus*.

The exclusive identification of caste with Hinduism has caused the situation in Pakistan and in Indian Muslim society to be largely neglected. Several important facts have gone virtually unnoticed. Gaborieau points out that Syed Ahmad Khan, spearhead of Muslim thought in the Indian subcontinent in the last century, was an Ashraf working for the welfare of the Ashraf. He used to say that his Aligarh college was not for weavers. The Muslim League's social program was copied off the Congress' program, and made no radical improvements. The Congress however, has been labeled a *baniya* party, and that is how it has been portrayed to generations of Pakistani students. Land reforms in Pakistani Punjab (1959, 1972) have not been as successful as in Indian Punjab, and large landholders still have a disproportionate share of the land.[64] A human rights commentator points out that Bhutto's land reforms were 'cosmetic', because landowners had been previously warned to transfer their lands to their family members.[65] This has not provoked the public outrage that it should have. The same commentator also points out that the ulama have not campaigned for the eradication of feudalism. Thus, even in the year 2002 the situation seems to be no different from that which obtained in the early forties, when the peasants of Punjab and especially of Sindh were

> "under the spell of the pirs," and "had imbibed the doctrine of *taqdir* (fate) from the constant preachings of the pirs", ... whose message was "He is low forever because God has made him so."''[66]

The advent of Islam has not automatically ensured equality. Indeed, the example of former Prime Minister Bhutto shows that inequality continued to be rampant. Bhutto's family owned, according to his own admission, *hundreds of thousands* of acres of land in Sindh and *for generations*.[67] His ancestor Sheto had obtained tax exemptions and other benefits, including the title of khan, from Aurangzeb.[68] Populists such as Bhutto have been able to get away with the rhetoric of *musâwât* (equality)[69], which he held out in his electoral promises, while doing nothing to promote social reform. It was left to the outspoken Dr. Ambedkar to point out that responsibility of fighting the iniquities of the caste system on the subcontinent devolve equally on Muslim and Hindu:

> The existence of these evils among the Muslims is distressing enough. But far more distressing is the fact that there is no organized movement of social reform among the Musalmans of India on a scale sufficient to bring about their eradication. The Hindus have their social evils. But there is this relieving feature about them – namely, that some of them are conscious of their existence and a few of them are actively agitating for their removal. The Muslims, on the other hand, do not realize that they are evils and consequently do not agitate for their removal.[70]

The situation has changed much since the days when Dr. Ambedkar wrote these words. The battle against inequality on the subcontinent, however, is far from won. There is every indication that the battle will yet prove to be long and costly. As a very first step, it is hoped that intellectuals will rise up to examine the institution of caste, in all its manifestations, with an unbiased mind. The whole of Indian history of this past millennium, and that of the three modern nations India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, is awaiting reexamination.

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1 This study is the result of a survey of scholarship. The author claims no originality, as the reader can see from the many quotes. A reexamination of the problems of the caste system has long been underway. The author's intention here is merely to collect some basic information in one place, as background for some articles in the future. The casual reader no less than the specialist will notice that the word caste is used throughout in a loose sense. Following Gerald Berreman (in *Structure and Function of Caste Systems* , in Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality, George de Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma (eds.), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1966) we have defined a caste system as *a hierarchy of groups in society, membership in which is determined by birth.* We have not examined very minutely whether the principle governing caste relations are based, for instance, on notions of purity/pollution, or occupation. Problems such as a precise definition of 'caste', the question whether the *Ashrâf* are really a caste, or a comparison between notions of purity and pollution among Hindus and among other religious groups, will be discussed in future articles.

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4 Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh (A Study of Culture Contact), Ghaus Ansari, Lucknow, 1960, Page 66.

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6 The first major population census conducted by the British, in 1872, divided Indian society into four classes: Aborigines, Aryans, Mixed, and Muslims. The Hindus were explicitly divided into three different categories. In the next census (1881), Aborigines and those of mixed Aryan-aborigine descent were lumped together. This tended to emphasize divisions among Hindus, and ignore those in Muslim society. A common heading used in the official surveys and education reports was "Caste if Hindu, otherwise religion." (Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India, David Lelyveld, Princeton University Press, 1978, p. 14).

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13 Nizami repeats the same arguments in his later book *Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century* (2002), for example, in Chapters II, III and IV.

14 In addition to Ambedkar, the Bengali thinker Rezaul Karim has drawn attention to the plight of the Muslim depressed classes, and to the fact that "aristocratic" Muslims opposed the discussion of these underprivileged groups when it was raised in the Bengal Council by Moulvi Abdus Samad, M.L.C. (*For India and Islam*, Rezaul Karim, Chuckervertty, Chaterjee & Co., Ltd., 1937, p. 49).

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labor is not yet widely upheld, even though the region is nearly devoid of Hindus. (*Religious Minorities in Pakistan*, Dr. Iftikhar H. Malik, 2002, Minority Rights Group International, p. 12)

27 Gaborieau, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

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31 Marc Gaborieau, *Les Ordres Mystiques dans le sous-continent indien: Un point de vue ethnologique* , p. 124, in Les Ordres Mystiques dans l'Islam: Cheminements et situation actuelle, A. Popovic & G. Veinstein (eds.), Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris.

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Caste, Politics and Votes in India

A. Surya Prakash*

Nearly sixty years ago Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who chaired the committee that drafted India's Constitution had warned that our democracy would be in peril if it failed to ensure the political empowerment of the downtrodden classes. Summing up the work of the Constituent Assembly during the final reading of the Constitution in November, 1949, he said castes are "antinational" because they bring about separation in social life and because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. "We must overcome all these difficulties if we are to become a nation in reality".

Dr. Ambedkar said so long as people were divided into several thousand castes, we were cherishing a "great delusion" in believing that we were a nation. "The sooner we realize that we are not as yet a nation in the social and psychological sense of the word, the better for us". Only then would we seriously think of ways and means of realizing this goal he said adding that India would gel as a nation only when we make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at its base, social democracy. On the social plane we have in India a society based on the principle of graded inequality which means elevation for some and degradation for others. "Without equality, liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over the many". How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. "We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy which this assembly has so laboriously built up" he warned. A year earlier, while introducing the Draft Constitution in the Constituent

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Assembly in November, 1948, Dr. Ambedkar told the assembly that constitutional morality was not a natural sentiment. It was something that had to be cultivated. "Democracy in India" he had warned was only "a top-dressing on an Indian Soil, which is essentially undemocratic".

It is difficult to find a more perceptive mind that could honestly discuss the social and political situation in the immediacy of India's freedom and draw out the road map for the survival of democracy in the country. There can be no doubt that the creation of a fair and just political system depended on the equalisation of political opportunity in the country.

I wish to tell Dr.Ambedkar, where ever he is now, that to a large measure we have, more by accident than design, succeeded in converting our political democracy into a social democracy. The formation of regional and caste-based parties and the splintering of major political parties like the Congress Party and the Janata Dal over the last three decades have ensured the political empowerment of many castes and classes which were hitherto in the hinterland of political power. All this has also meant the translation of social diversity into political diversity and brought about a dramatic change in the social composition of our democratic bodies. For example, there were just 12 political parties in the Second Lok Sabha in 1957. This has now risen to 42 political parties in the year 2007.

The emergence of new parties signify the political empowerment of neglected groups. Secondly, the Lok Sabha is today a far more representative body than it was a half a century ago. For example in the First Lok Sabha which came into existence in 1952, 51 per cent of the members were lawyers, doctors, journalists and writers. Lawyers had such a big share of seats (more than one-third of the House) that one wondered whether the India of the 1950s was a nation of lawyers. Similarly, traders and industrialists had won 12 per cent of the seats while agriculturists (though India's economy was mostly agrarian) had just 22.50 per cent of the seats. All this has changed over the years and we now see the occupational democratization of the Lower House of our Parliament. For example, the number of lawyers, doctors, journalists and writers in the Lok Sabha had fallen to 14 per cent in recent years. Traders and industrialists are down to about 2 per cent whereas agriculturists had come to occupy half the seats in the House. Though the Lok Sabha Secretariat does not maintain caste-wise data of members, the rising political empowerment of persons practicing different occupations is an indicator of the growing assertiveness of the intermediate castes and the Dalits and their rising strength in democratic bodies.

These statistics indicate the equalization of political opportunity and the rising empowerment of hitherto underprivileged social groups. However what buttresses the statistical analysis is the political ground reality. India has seen the emergence of a large number of new political parties – some regional, some caste-based - over the last three decades and the new parties have made our democracy more participatory. Everyone is now getting sucked into the democratic circus, thus reducing the scope for disillusionment with democracy. Among the new political parties are Ms.Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party, representing Dalit interests, the Lok Janshakti Party of Mr.Ram Vilas promoting the interests of Dalits in Bihar, the Rashtriya Janata Dal floated by Mr.Lalu Prasad Yadav to safeguard the interests of backward castes like Yadavas in Bihar and a couple of political parties floated in Andhra Pradesh and Assam to safeguard Muslim interests. In addition, we have the Janata Dal (Secular) headed by Mr.Deve Gowda in Karnataka, which has a strong Vokkaliga vote base, the Telugu Desam launched by the late Mr.N.T.Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh, which has a strong Kamma vote base and the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar which has politically empowered people from castes such as Kurmis and Keoris. There are also regional parties with influence across castes like the Trinamool Congress of Ms.Mamata Bannerjee in West Bengal and the Telengana Rashtra Samithi in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh. These developments have helped draw different caste and social groups into electoral politics and ensured them seats in democratic bodies. Though the splintering of political parties and the emergence of caste-based parties has put a question mark of governance and political stability, there can be no denying that the participation of more and more groups across the social spectrum in the democratic process has enhanced the chances of survival of the democratic system itself.

Apart from backward castes, the growth of regional parties and the end of one-party rule at the federal level and in the states has meant greater participation of people from different regions of India. This is put an end to centrifugal tendencies in states like Tamil Nadu where the people felt that the dominance of politicians from the Hindi heartland deprived them of a legitimate share in political power at the Centre. The end of one-party rule has also meant the advent of the coalition era and political power at the federal level for many regional outfits like the

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Telugu Desam. These developments have put the brakes of anti-Hindi sentiments in the non-Hindi speaking areas and contributed in no small measure to the political integration of India.

But in all this, I regard the success of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the recent election to the Uttar Pradesh Assembly as the most significant and as an event that has far reaching implications for the future of democracy in India. The success of the B S P in this election symbolizes the political empowerment of one of the most oppressed and disadvantaged social groups any where in the world. It constitutes the bloodless and peaceful transfer of political power from a class of people who were considered to be oppressors to a class of people who were the oppressed. This must truly be the most remarkable story of the triumph of democracy.

Though the Dalits have had reservations in democratic bodies, government jobs and educational institutions, the reins of political power have never been in their hands. Every political party pays lip sympathy to the cause of Scheduled Castes but the levers of power have invariably been with the Hindu Upper Castes and dominant Middle Castes. Therefore, a clear majority in the recent election to the Uttar Pradesh Assembly for the BSP, symbolizes the first-ever clear transfer of power from the Hindu upper crust to one of the most oppressed and disadvantaged social groups in the world. However belated this development may seem, it is certainly a significant milestone in India's democratic journey over the last six decades and will hopefully minimize the bitterness amongst this section of the country's population over the tardy efforts of the Indian State to equalize opportunities.

Ironically, though Dr.Ambedkar made the first attempt to politically mobilize the dalits, he met with little success whether it was the Labour Party that he launched in the 1930s or the Republican Party which he founded much later. The idea eventually took off in the mid 1980s, a good 30 years after Dr.Ambedkar's death when the late Mr.Kanshiram decided to try it out. Mr. Kanshiram, who founded the BSP, prepared the ground for a Dalit political party through the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) that was established about three decades ago. As this organization grew in strength, Kanshiram took the first step towards formation of a political party when he established the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangarsh Samithi (D S– 4) in the early 1980s. DS-4 became a code for Dalit political empowerment and it made its presence felt for the first time in Uttar Pradesh prior to the Lok Sabha election held in 1984. During that election, as the Congress Party rode a massive sympathy wave consequent to the assassination of Indira Gandhi, Dalit youth painted the walls in Eastern and Central Uttar Pradesh with this secret code that stood for Dalit political aspirations and bonding. DS-4 metamorphosed into a full-fledged political party in 1985. Initially the party's two top leaders – Mr.Kashiram and Ms.Mayawati – focused on consolidation of Dalit votes. Once this was achieved, they roped in the Muslims and the BSP was promoted as a Dalit-Muslim party. This strategy paid off because in the Lok Sabha election held in 1999, the party secured 14 seats and 22.08 per cent of the vote in the state. But, while the BSP had a firm grip on the Dalit vote, it found that it had to share the Muslim vote with the Samajwadi Party. The division in the Muslim vote did not give the BSP the clear lead it was looking for over the Samajwadi Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Its share of the popular vote in the state remained in the 22-24 per cent band, which was inadequate for it to gain a clear majority in the assembly elections.

In the First-Past-The-Post System, whenever there are two major political parties or coalitions and a few smaller parties in the fray, a party or coalition will need around 42 - 45 per cent of the popular vote to secure a clear majority in the legislature. Over the last two decades, the political scene has got crowded with the emergence of several regional and caste-based parties with vote banks big enough to take on the biggies like the Congress and the BJP. This has led to triangular and quadrangular contests and has substantially brought down the percentage of votes needed by a party or coalition to secure a clear majority. For example in Uttar Pradesh where you have four prominent parties in the contest, the threshold could be as low as 30 per cent. Aware of this relationship between votes and seats, the BSP decided over a year ago to enlarge its social base just enough to cross this threshold. Though the party was built on a hate-Upper Castes slogan, Ms.Mayawati offered the live branch to the Brahmins because she perceived the newly-empowered Other Backward Castes as the bigger evil. The party held several Brahmin Sammelans and laid the ground for the Dalit-Muslim-Brahmin vote base that eventually helped the party in the recent election. It also took BSP's vote share from the 22-24 per cent band to just over 30 per cent – enough in a quadrangular electoral battle to obtain a clear majority.

We are indeed lucky to see the transfer of political power in the country's largest state to the Dalits with our democratic system and

Constitution still intact because Maoists and other radical left groups have been tempting Dalits for a long time to join them in wrecking the democratic system. Despite this, the commitment of a majority of the Dalits to the democratic process speaks volumes of the patience and resilience among a people who have put up with some of the worst humiliations that man can inflict on man. Their endurance is indeed remarkable because even in 1949 Dr.Ambedkar had declared that the downtrodden classes were "tired of being governed" and were therefore "impatient to govern themselves", In his view, the sooner room is made for the realization of their aspiration, the better for the country, for its independence and for the continuance of its democratic structure. "This urge for self-realisation in the downtrodden classes must not be allowed to devolve into a class struggle or class war" he had warned. .

It has taken the Dalits 60 years to get the opportunity "to govern themselves", at least in one state. Fortunately, the Dalit party has come to power riding on a rainbow coalition. This electoral success of the BSP can have considerable social and political implications. It can now offer to extend this coalition experiment to other states provided the Brahmins and others who are at the top of the Hindu caste hierarchy are willing to work with it to eliminate social inequalities. Apart from Uttar Pradesh, the BSP has been making its presence felt in Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir and Haryana. As we go along, it could set its sights on other states like Rajasthan, Bihar and Karnataka. If this happens, the BSP could become the first "regional" party to acquire a national footprint and unsettle national parties like the Congress and the BJP, which have never factored in the prospect of having another contender for the pan-Indian vote.

Therefore, willy-nilly we appear to have addressed the concerns voiced by Dr.Ambedkar while drafting India's Constitution and ensured that political democracy also becomes a social democracy. The flip side of all this is of course fears of instability but that seems a bit exaggerated if one sees the remarkable manner in which over a dozen or even two dozen political parties have combined to offer the country stable coalitions at the national level since 1998.

Babasaheb Ambedkar's Ideas of Social Justice and Just Society

Vivek Kumar*

Let us accept the fact that Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has been victim of a process of reductionism. Mainstream media, academia and intelligentsia have played a dominant role in this process of reductionism. As a result he has been viewed and reviewed only as 'a Dalit Leader'. Some progressive intellectuals have at the most called him 'Chief Architect of the Indian Constitution'. In turn his contributions in the spheres of understanding individual, caste, Hindu Social order, problems of Hindu women, Indian minorities, nation and nation building etc. from an alternative perspective have been fully blacked out. Above all his ideas about social justice have also not caught the imagination of the mainstream academia and intelligentsia.

Thanks to the Dalit movement led by the Dalits themselves; Babasaheb Ambedkar has got such visibility that no other leader of modern India has. On the basis of association of masses to a particular leader, number of statues of a particular leader erected by the individuals on their own not with the help of government, types of celebrations on the occasion of his birth and conversion anniversaries and commemoration on his *Mahaparinibban* anniversaries, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar can be termed as the omnipresent organic leader of modern India. His contribution in reviving Buddhism in India and subsequently his association with the world's Buddhist community has made Babasaheb acceptable in the countries where ever Buddhism is practiced. Moreover, in this era of globalization with the information revolution and presence of Dalit Diaspora, Babasaheb Ambedkar is revered all over the world and truly he has become a Global icon. The poem below explains most of the facets of significant personality of Babasaheb and different roles he has played during his lifetime. The poem, narrated at the grassroots in the Hindi heartland, is translated by the author here to make the point:

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Baba the Great

Words to Dumb
Ears to deaf
Respect to Dalits
Equal rights to women
Charity of husband to Kastoorba
Charity of life to Gandhi
Constitution to India
Knowledge of Buddhist philosophy to the world
Such was Baba the great!

Today Babasaheb Ambedkar is accepted not only as a Dalit leader or only a Constitution maker but also as a 'nation builder', a human rights, champion, and 'Global Icon'. This acceptance of Babasaheb Ambedkar by the masses in general and global community in particular has forced the mainstream academia and intelligentsia in India to include Ambedkar nominally or notionally in the curriculum of social sciences, although, he is not taught in curriculum at different levels of education— primary, secondary or higher. The irony is that even if he is taught, no questions are asked on him in the examination and if a question is asked it is asked in optional. This whole attitude towards an icon of erstwhile-marginalized community proves the point of the reductionism and blackout of the icon. Not going into details of his larger ideas and role of Dr. Ambedkar' leadership this paper is a humble effort to understand and analyze how Babasaheb Ambedkar conceptualized the principles of social justice. However, before we analyze his ideas of social justice let us look at the concept of social justice as propounded by the different social scientists. Based on the principles enshrined in the scientific definition of Social justice we will evolve a 'purposive' definition of social justice with principles as envisaged by Babasaheb Ambedkar.

The Concept of Social Justice

Plato defined social justice as, "the principle of a society consisting of different types of men... who have combined the impulse of their need for one another and their concentration on their combination in one society and their concentration on their separate functions, have made a whole which is perfect because it is the product of image of the whole of the human mind (Republic 368d quoted in Mohapatra 1999)". In modern times the term social justice was first used in 1840 by a Sicilian priest, Luigi Taparelli d' Azeglio. However, Antonio Rasmini Serbasti gave the term prominence in his work, La constitutione Civile Secodo La Giurtizia Sociale in the year 1848 (Noval 2000: 11 quoted in Yadav: 2006).

Further, in a series of articles beginning with "Justice as Fairness" John Rawls propounded a contractualist theory of Justice as it applies to institutions and practices. It is based on the notions of fairness and reciprocity. Rawls believed that his theory of justice is an improvement over utilitarian accounts of justice as maximum welfare. John Rawls developed the following principles of justice:

1. Each person is to have an equal right to most extensive basic liberty compatible with similar liberty for others.
2a. Social and economic inequities are arbitrary unless they are reasonably expected to be to the advantage of the representative man in each income class.
2b. Inequalities are to attach to positions and offices equally open to all (Choptiany 1973:146).

Similarly taking a leaf from Rawl's theory of social justice, Beteile (2005: 417), argues that, "the fundamental issue in distributive justice is equality; a more equal or at least a less unequal distribution of the benefits and of social co-operation". He opines that, "In that sense distributive justice to go beyond equality in the purely formal sense: equality before the law, seeks to go beyond equality in the purely formal sense: equality before the law, the equal protection of the laws, or even formal equality of opportunity. Its central concern is, in the language of Rawl 'to address the bias of contingencies in the in the direction of equality'… Any attempt to promote distributive justice must begin with a consideration of the existing inequalities in society…it is essential to keep in sight both inequalities between individual and disparities. Disparities between groups have been historically go great significance in Indian society".

Plato and Ralwa's concept of social justice would mean giving every man his due. The basic aim of social justice is to remove the imbalances in the social, political and economic life of the people to create a just society. In terms of culture-specificity, the term social justice has a different meaning in Indian society. It means dispensing justice to those to whom it has been systematically denied in the past because of an established social structure.

Inferring Meaning of Social Justice from Ambedkar's writings

It is a fact that Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar did not propound any specific definition or theory of "Social Justice" per se. His thoughts are eloquently portrayed in his writings and speeches published posthumously. On the basis of these we can easily argue that Ambedkar has mentioned multiple principles for the establishment of an open and just social order in general and Indian society in particular. Therefore with the help of these elements we can carve out a theory of social justice, what can then be then referred as Ambedkar's theory of Social Justice. We can extract five basic principles, from writings and speeches of Ambedkar, through which justice can be dispensed in the society. These are:

1. Establishing a society where individual becomes the means of all social purposes
2. Establishment of society based on equality, liberty and fraternity
3. Establishing democracy- political, economic and social.
4. Establishing democracy through constitutional measures and
5. Establishing democracy by breaking monopoly of upper strata on political power

Going by the principles of Ambedkar's theory of social justice, Ambedkar was of the opinion that Social Justice can be dispensed in a free social order in which an individual is end in itself. Similarly, the terms of associated life between members of society must be regarded by consideration founded on liberty, equality and fraternity. In a way these principles of social justice are similar to the principles of social justice as mentioned in Rawl's theory. Let us look these principles in operation.

Arguing a case for open social order in his writings Ambedkar emphasized that generally there are two fundamental and essentials of a free social order. According to him, "The first is that the individual is an end himself and that the aim and object of society is the growth of the individual and the development of his personality. Society is not above the individual and if the individual has to subordinate himself to society, it is because such subordination is for his betterment and only to the extent necessary"(Ambedkar 1987:95). It is with this aim he had rejected village as a unit of governance and adopted the individual as its unit. He vehemently criticized the part played by village communities in the history and congratulated the Drafting committee for accepting individual as the unit of governance (Ambedkar 1994:61-62). Ambedkar had argued for individual as end itself as he was fully aware of the fact that, "The Hindu social order does not recognize the individual as a center of social purpose... For the Hindu social order is based principally on class or Varna and not on individuals... (Ambedkar 1987:99).

In fact Ambedkar has always been for establishing a society based on the principles of liberty, fraternity, and equality. This has to be for every individual and that social justice can be delivered to the members of the society only if the society is based equality, liberty and fraternity. However one can argue that this can happen only when there is fraternity in society. In this context let us see what Ambedkar says. According to him, "ideal would be a society based on Liberty, Equality and Fraternity...What objection can there be to fraternity? I cannot imagine any. An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to another part. In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points and contacts with other modes and associations. In other word there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy. Democracy is not merely a form of government. It is primary mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. It is essentially an attitude of respect and reverence towards followers. Few object to liberty in the sense of a right to free movement, in the and a right to property, tools and materials as being necessary for earning a living to keep the body in due state of health. Why not allow liberty to benefit by an effective and complete use of a person's power? However, the problem is that people who support liberty in the sense of right to life, limb and property would not readily consent to liberty if it involves the liberty to choose one's profession. Ambedkar argues that to object to the liberty to choose a profession is to perpetuate slavery. For slavery does not only merely mean a legalized form of subjection. It means a state of society in which some men are forced to accept other occupations which control their conduct. This condition is found even where there is no slavery in the legal sense. For instance it is found in the society where caste system is prevalent because some persons are compelled to carry on certain prescribed calling which are not of their choice. Any objection to Equality. The objection to equality may be found and one may have to admit that all men are equal. Equality may be a fiction but nonetheless accept it as the governing principle.

A man's power is dependent upon 1) physical heredity 2) social inheritance or endowment in the form of parental care, education, accumulation of scientific knowledge, everything which enables him to be more efficient than the savage, and finally, 3) on his own efforts. In all these three aspects men are undoubtly unequal. But the question is, shall we treat them as unequal because they are unequal? From the stand point of the individualistic it may be just to treat men unequally so far there efforts are unequal. It may to desirable to give as much as incentives as possible to the full development of every one's power s. but what would happen if men were treated unequally as they are, in the first two respects, it is obvious that those individuals also in whose favor there is birth, education, family name, power connection and inherited wealth would be selected in the race but selection under such circumstances would not be a selection of the of the able. It would be the selection of the privileged. The reason therefore, which forces that in the third respect we should treat men equally demands that in the first two respect we should treat men as equally as possible. On the other hand it can be urged that if it is good for the social body to get the most out and its members, it can get most out of them only by making them equal as far as possible at the very start of the race. That is one reason why we cannot escape equality. There is second reason for accepting equality. A statesman is concerned with vast majority of people. He has neither the time nor the knowledge to draw fine distinctions and to treat each equally i.e. according to need or according to capacity. However desirable or reasonable and equitable treatment of men may be, humanity is not capable of assortment and classification. The statesmen, therefore, must follow some rough and ready rule and that ready and rough rule is to treat all men alike and not because they are alike but because classification and assortment is impossible. The doctrine of equality is glaringly fallacious but taking all in all it is the only way a statesmen can proceed in politics which is a severely practicable affair and which demands a severely practical test" (Ambedkar 1979: 57-58)

After India's political independence for dispensing social justice in the wake of emerging democracy in a hierarchically arranged society, Ambedkar discussed the operationalization of principles of equality, liberty, and fraternity, which were considered to be cardinal principles of any democracy. He argued, "We must... not...be content with mere political democracy. We must make sure our political democracy a social democracy as well" (Ambedkar 1994: 1216). Ambedkar went on to define social democracy as well. In his own words, "What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life. These principles of liberty, equality and fraternity are not to be treated as separate items of trinity" (Ambedkar 1994: 1216). Another significant contribution of Ambedkar in the process of establishment of social democracy is his explanation of nature of three cardinal principles of democracy i.e. liberty, quality, and fraternity. He opined, "They form a union of trinity in the sense that to divorce one from the other is to defeat the very purpose of democracy. Liberty cannot be divorced from equality, equality cannot be divorced liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity. (Ambedkar 1994: 1216).

Finally he cautioned the Indians how to eradicate the conditions of persisting inequality and emerging equality with the dispensation of social justice. In his own words, "On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social economic life we will have inequality. In Politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to live this life of contradiction? How long shell we continue to live this life of contradictions? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. We must remove this contradiction at the earliest possible moment or else those who suffer from inequality will blow up the structure of political democracy, which..."The second thing we are wanting in is recognition of the principle of fraternity. What does fraternity mean? Fraternity means a sense of common brotherhood of Indians-If Indians being one people. It is the principle, which gives unity and solidarity to social life. It is difficult thing to achieve" (Ambedkar 1994: 1216-17)

Although initially Ambedkar was skeptical of delivery of justice through government machinery but later on he preferred the same by having the share of Dalits in it. Going by the then existing Hindu social order Expressing his anguish on the failure of delivery of justice Ambedkar had opined "It might have been brought that the principle of equal justice would strike a death blow to the established order. As a matter of fact, far from suffering any damage the established order has continued to operate in spite of it. It might be asked why the principle of equal justice has failed to have its effect. The answer to this is simple. To enunciate the principle of justice is one thing. To make it effective is another thing. Whether the principle of equal justice is effective or not must necessarily depend upon the nature and character of the civil services who must be left to administer the principle. If the civil services is by reason of its class bias is the friend of the established order and the enemy of the new order, the new order can never come into being. That a civil services in tune with the new order was essential for the success of the new order was recognized by Karl Marx in 1871 in the formation of Paris commune and adopted by Lenin in the constitution of Soviet communism. Fortunately, the British Government never cared about the personnel of the Civil Services. Indeed it opened the gates of the administration to those classes who believed in the old established order of the Hindus in which the principle of equality had no place. As a result of this fact, India has been ruled by the British but administered by the Hindus" (Ambedkar 1989: 104). However, as the time passed by Ambedkar gradually became aware that the Social Justice can be delivered through the government machinery and through constitutional means and therefore Dalits have to be part of it. In this context he wrote, "The power to administer law is not less important than the power to make laws. And the spirit of the legislators may easily be violated if not nullified by the machinery of the administrators this is not the only reason why the depressed classes should show special concern for securing power of control over administration. Often times under pressure of work or under difficulties of circumstances one has to leave good deal of discretionary power in the hands of the heads of the administrative departments. The welfare of the people must greatly depend on how impartially this discretionary power is exercised in a country like India where the public service is exclusively manned by people of one community; there is a great danger of this vast discretionary power being used for the personal aggrandizement of a class. The best antidote against it is to insist on a proper admixture of caste and creeds including the depressed classes and there will be no difficulty in guaranteeing this safeguard to us by a clause in the Constitution. Such protection you could have dispensed with if there was any chance of the depressed classes being represented in the future cabinets of the country. But there is not the remotest chance of this in view of the fact that the depressed classes will always remain in minority. This makes it all the more necessary why you should insist upon such a guarantee" (Ambedkar, 1989:265).

Moreover Ambedkar had cautioned people that, "If we wish do maintain democracy not merely in form, but also in fact, ...we must do is to hold fast to constitutional methods of achieving our social and economic objectives. It means we must abandon the bloody methods of revolution. It means that we must abandon the method of civil disobedience, non-cooperation and *satyagraha*. When there was no way left for constitutional method for achieving economic and social objectives, there was a great deal of justification for unconstitutional methods. But where constitutional methods are open, there can be no justification for these unconstitutional methods. These methods are nothing but anarchy and the sooner they are abandoned, the better for us" (Ambedkar 1994: 1215).

He was also for the freedom of the individual as well. Furthermore, even for the healthy future of the emerging Indian democracy he wanted to strengthened social and economic equality along with political one. According to Ambedkar one of the way to deliver social justice to the individual was breaking the monopoly of the upper strata. Ambedkar in this regard opined, "...there can be no gainsaying that political power in this country has too long been the monopoly of a few. This monopoly has not merely deprived them of their chance of betterment; it has sapped them of what may be called the significance of life. These down-trodden classes are tired of being governed. They are impatient to govern themselves. This urge of self-realization in the down-trodden classes must not be allowed into a class struggle or class war. It would lead to a division of the House. That would a day of disaster. This can only be done by the establishment of equality and fraternity in all sphere of life. People are fast changing...They are getting tired of government by the people. They are prepared to have Government for the people...If (Ambedkar 1994: 1218).

Conclusions

To conclude, the paper has discussed some themes of social justice and in this light, it also discusses Ambedkar's theory of social justice. Accordingly social justice has been defined in the paper as a principle that lays down the foundation of a society based on equality, liberty and fraternity. Although Plato and Rawls have not defined social justice in these specific terms, yet these aforesaid principles can be inferred from their writings on social justice. Once this proposition about social justice is accepted it was easy to infer from Ambedkar's writings and speeches published posthumously, that equality, liberty, and fraternity are the basic principles of his theory as well. To begin with Ambedkar argues that for establishment of a society where individual is an end in himself and the aim and objective of society is the growth of the individual and development of his personality. He expected that there should be multiple channels and conjoint communicated experience. Further for Ambedkar Equality, liberty and fraternity cannot be divorced from each other. He had argued that, without equality liberty would produce the supremacy of the few over many. Equality without liberty would kill individual initiative. Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things. Moreover, Ambedkar had envisaged that social justice could be brought when political democracy is extended in social and economic field as well. This has to be done through constitutional means and by breaking the monopoly of the erstwhile political and social elites. That is why he wanted that the Dalits and other marginalized sections of the society should join the administration. Ambedkar was aware of the existing corruption and biases in the Indian administration and judiciary. For him incorporation of aspiration of the marginalized categories in the rules and policy is not enough for dispensing social justice but incorporation of the individuals is also a must condition for dispensing justice.

Hence Ambedkar's theory of social justice becomes akin to Plato and John Rawls's theory of social justice. Further, with the help of Beteille's analysis of distributive justice which includes distribution of benefits equally to every member of society, equality before law, equal protection of laws and equality of opportunity reflect upon the other elements of Ambedkar's theory of social justice. In this context we can observe that Ambedkar had already enshrined these values in the Constitution of India. The value of equality in the preamble of the Indian Constitution is not only a slogan. Rather it has been substantiated with equality of opportunity (Article 16) and equality of condition that is reservation (Articles 330, 332, 335 and 46). This was done specifically because he might have thought that in a hierarchical society, like India, equality of opportunity may in turn produce inequality and subordination.

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Looking East Through India's North East

Patricia Mukhim*

India's North East, homeland to the Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman natives, has suddenly come of age. In recent times several Union Ministers are flying in and out of the region. We have a surfeit of schemes and blueprints for development, so much so, there is a real danger of drowning in them unless the 'stakeholders' learn to navigate purposefully. Since interested parties include the neighbouring countries of Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Singapore, Malaysia et al, whose interests in the region have been perked up, it is important to ensure that hard economic sense transforms the tenuous political positions of different ethnic groups looking for a political space to articulate their economic imperatives.

On June 23, this year Union Minister for DONER, Mani Shanker Aiyar accompanied by his colleague, Union Minister of State for Commerce, Jairam Ramesh hosted the Thai Minister for Commerce, Krirk Krai Jirapaet in three state capitals of Agartala, Guwahati and Shillong. This is a maiden visit by a serving minister of a foreign country to this region. Jirapaet was accompanied by officials and an eclectic group of Thai business lobby. They came, they saw and they promised to return, to play golf in Shillong, maybe sign a joint venture memo to upscale the rubber trade, in Agartala, and then put the seal on an MOU for world class road and bridge construction at Guwahati. These are just some of the delicacies on the menu. 'If the North East Governments are serious and the Union Government grants us the right concessions, we are ready to tango and together we can go places', said Jirapaet at a press conference.

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Assam's Industries minister, revealed the business plans of his state in a power point presentation. His presentation focused on possible areas of co-operation between the two countries. He earmarked power production, tourism infrastructure, the silk industry, food processing and making the Brahmaputra an all weather navigable waterway as being important enough to require the invaluable expertise of the Thais.

Other states left much of the work of briefing the visitors to their bureaucrats as if Government were to launch into full scale business. We all know what happens when Governments decide to do business? There are enough examples of failed projects, court cases, loss making public sector undertakings? At this juncture it is the public private partnership (PPP) which needs to be put in place as we look at trade co-operation with South East Asia. At Guwahati, entrepreneurs from both countries hobnobbed and showed keen interest in learning about each other. This makes sense because future business tie-ups will have to fit the PPP paradigm where governments will only play a facilitating role.

For the Thai people, looking West for investments means good road connectivity through Myanmar to North East India. On more than one occasion Jirapaet stressed on this vital aspect. Responding to these concerns, his counterpart, Jairam Ramesh explained that India has signed a build, transfer, use (BTU) agreement with Myanmar to make the Kaladan river a viable waterway linking it with Mizoram. India has also made a formal offer to Myanmar to rebuild the old Akyab port, now called Sitwe. Ramesh further stated that the free trade agreements (FTA) currently under consideration, could act as the trigger for intensifying Indo-Thai relations. North East India, according to Ramesh is a natural zone for organic cultivation of spices and other horticultural products. The region, he said needed to leverage on its strengths. Currently, rubber from Tripura has the potential to become the major element for transforming the economy of that state. A novel initiative taken by the Ministry of Commerce is to replace barbed wire fences with rubber plants along the 856 Km boundary between Bangladesh and Tripura. This social fencing aims at providing livelihood security to people along the border.

Minister DoNER, Mani Shanker Aiyar termed Tripura as the Qatar of India, floating as it does on natural gas. Evacuating the gas, however, is a problem since the transit route is through Bangladesh. To right the decades of neglect, Aiyar announced that Rs 50,000 crores has been earmarked for infrastructure development. Roads and rail links and waterways would form the core of that infrastructure. This astounding allocation however requires absorption capacity which the states lack. Thailand built its roads with foreign collaboration and Thais have imbibed that expertise. This experience is what North East should tap. Aiyar offered to make his ministry and the North Eastern Council (NEC) as the single window to promote trade and investments.

In a preliminary tie-up, North East-Thai collaboration could bring synergy in tourism, food processing, the hotel industry and bamboo technology all of which are Thailand's forte. Jirapaet said Thailand gets 11 million tourists a year. All of North East India gets only about 3 million annually. With a dynamic tourism and Thai collaboration, a good number of tourists visiting Thailand could be enticed to visit North East India.

Aiyar, the only DoNER minister who has given a respectable profile to this ministry is a man in a hurry to make things happen. This human dynamo is all set to do the long distance sprint. But whether the state governments of the North East have his adrenaline to be co-runners in this marathon relay race is the moot point. Yet unless North East India pulls up its socks it could well miss the bus.

Meanwhile the Ministry of External Affairs new initiative to set up public diplomacy (PD) division in North East India is another attempt to recalibrate a proper balance between national security and the soft power of diplomacy. Soft power according to Joseph Nye is the ability to get what you want by attracting and persuading others to adopt your goals. It differs from the 'hard power' of coercion and military action. In a tumultuous North East both hard and soft power are essential elements of statecraft but persuasion is certainly a less expensive and less abrasive option.

India's economic and geo-political imperative to align with the All South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has forced it to look east. This shift happened as far back as 1992 with economic liberalization. In trying to look eastwards, India is forced to take cognizance of the fact that its North Eastern periphery must become the strategic connection, the bridge, as it were, that connects it to South East Asia. Suddenly, what is now hyped as the Look East Policy (LEP) is becoming important to the people of this region. As active stakeholders they want to know what's in it for them. And rightly so. This region does not want to be an over-bridge between South East Asia and the rest of India. Overbridges tend to become neglected and easily slip into decadence. People from this region are well aware of their own need to engage with elements of the Look East Policy which directly and indirectly impinge on the region. They want to have a controlling interest and bargaining power in negotiating the best prices for some of their niche products and minerals. It is with this aim that people of the North East are asking for a tangible Look East Policy. But for whatever compulsions, Government of India has chosen to let the LEP be only an approach and not something crafted indelibly.

In an article titled, Look East Policy, Abhaya Kashyap (South Asia Politics, 2006) argues that the ASEAN region has an abundance of natural resources, manufacturing abilities and technological skills that can provide a natural base for the growth of synergies in trade and investment between ASEAN and India. Several summits have been held from time to time to promote these synergies. India shares extensive land and maritime boundaries with Myanmar. Yet this country's military junta and its stiff-necked resistance to democracy could pose the biggest road block to what is an emerging geo-political alignment.

Despite the roadblocks however, India has signed a number of agreements with Myanmar. India's technological expertise is being utilized by Myanmar in its oil and gas exploration. Proposals are on for a rail link between India and Myanmar besides and ongoing project for constructing a tri-lateral highway connecting Moreh in the India-Myanmar border to Mae-Sot in Thailand and Bagan in Myanmar. This highway would provide the crucial trade links in the future.

As a growing economic power, India's links not just with the countries in the various diplomatic groupings but also with those outside the fold is important. China exerts tremendous control over the region. It's rapid economic growth and political clout creates a climate of insecurity among the ASEAN as well as other smaller unconnected entities who tend to view this expansionist strategy as detrimental to the peaceful development of the region. India's belated entry into this alignment, therefore, can be seen as a check and balance within the region.

These developments in South East Asia are of interest to India's North East because of the geographical proximity of the area with those countries. Myanmar's thick jungles have been home and hearth to insurgent groups of Nagaland, Manipur and Assam. For that reason alone co-operation with Myanmar is vital. A conflict torn region can be a handicap to trade and commerce. It can hamper investments. But perhaps one of the reasons for conflict is the stark neglect that this region has suffered for decades. By the time development funds were pumped in things had gone out of control. Besides, those funds became sops to contain insurgency rather than real attempts to connect the region through vital infrastructure. Even today many of the North Eastern states are disconnected or badly connected. During the monsoons when flights within the region are frequently cancelled, road transport becomes the only option. But the condition of the roads as Mr Pranab Mukherjee, has himself experienced, are appalling. Think of the back-breaking road journeys to Imphal, Tamenglong, Ukhrul, Aizawl and beyond and you begin to have nightmares. Landslides make driving that much more precarious. How such a geographically fractured region can build trade linkages is a dilemma that the Centre has not bothered to engage with.

Despite the many heartburns, some initiatives from the Ministry of Commerce which has identified land customs stations in the region for border trade, will hopefully propel some meaningful trade. What is extremely important however is for the Governments of the North Eastern States to converge and have a common road map for economic development. Although, DoNER and the North Eastern Council (NEC) are meant to provide a focused sense of direction, very often they tend to become mere implementing agencies instead of lobbyists for the region which is what is needed.

In fact, the amount of money claimed to be spent on India's North East sound highly exaggerated. Every ministry of the Government of India that spends money in the region must necessarily ensure that those projects are physically monitored and the money spent is commensurate to the work produced. Corruption is not a one-way traffic. Very often the journey of corruption begins in New Delhi where ready-made schemes are available a dime a dozen. If you can pay a bribe you get the scheme. But whether the scheme is implementable on the ground is a different matter. When the money is spent a utilization certificate is produced for a project that does not even exist. Everyone knows this yet no one is keen to streamline matters.

The Look East Policy will also bring with it a host of demands and foreign investors who will also include fly by night operators wanting to make hay while the going is good. Hence the imperative for intellectuals, civil society and developmental strategists within the region to engage their governments and demand transparency at all levels.

India's Eastern Neighbourhood, (IEN) Challenges in our Relationships and the Look East Policy

Toki Blah*

When one speaks of India's Eastern Neighbourhood, the word that immediately comes to mind is the North East or to be more exact the North East of India. To some, the region continues to remain the land of mystery, eternally shrouded in the mist of Upland Tribal legends and folklore. For many others it is the region that somehow always finds mention in the Front Page columns of Indian newspapers, usually for all the wrong reasons. For its militant activities, the accompanying violence and the inevitable human right violations that come with such violence ; its natural disasters and the perpetual plight of its rural poor and its urban slums; the rampant corruption abetted by a brazenfaced and opportunistic political class or for the seemingly irreconcilable attitude of most of the regions tribes to the concept of Indian nationalism . The territory also most frequently finds mention because of the tension it manages to arouse between India and her Eastern neighbours. In recent times it's the Chinese intrusions into or their claim over Arunachal Pradesh or perhaps its the thorn- in- the- flesh game played by the wily Bangladeshis vis a vis refuge and shelter given to NE militants in that country. If the above factors wax and wane with the fortunes of time there however is universal unanimity over the fact that the region is in desperate need for a major paradigm change. Its Administrative setup creaks and groans from burdens it was never designed to carry and bear. Its Political system totally out of tune with the real prime needs of the people and the land. Its governance tottering on the verge of total collapse. Its troubled and tormented populations in desperate search for a way out from the mess they find themselves in as the North East rapidly symbolizes as no other region, the specter of failed states. These are symptoms that do not bode well for the general wellbeing of the region. They definitely are signs that call for an urgent review and reassessment on how the region and its people are perceived and how they are to be approached .

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It is to the credit of New Delhi that efforts have never slumped in so far as attempts to find solutions to the regions ills are concerned . It is somewhat ironic therefore that the term North East was first coined from such attempts. To be truthful , there is no such single homogenous ethno-cultural entity as North East India. On the contrary the entire region is composed of numerous tribes and communities some quite large in population others numbering only thousands. Each such composition different and unique in cultural identity from its neighbours. There are more than 250 such distinct communities, each again with different aspirations and demands. To be fair to the Central Secretariat at New Delhi, who has the time; the patience; the knowledge and the skill to manage this ethnic chaos on a sustained individual basis ? To simplify the problem and in typical babu style, a North East file was opened and none have ever seen the need to challenge this wisdom! Thus was the word North East born and with it the host of problems all of us are now part of.

There is an adage that says " We hate people because we don't know them , and we don't know them because we hate them." It is a apt description of relations between New Delhi and the different communities and tribes of the region . It would have been to Delhi's advantage to have been able to deal with the problems of an identifiable and discernible North East People. A holistic approach to problems of a homogenous entity would have been preferred and would have made life that much more easier. This was however not to be and attempts to implement ambitious and much publicized development projects through inept and corrupt local state Governments never reached the intended benficiaries. To add insult to injury local politicians are the first to raise the cry of central indifference and apathy when such a cry suits them. It is therefore not surprising that the tag of ingratitude is never far below the surface whenever mainland India has dealings with this region. On the other hand Government failure to address individual community concerns is equally mystifying to the local tribes men who then react indignantly on being reminded of benefits they never received in the first place !

This misunderstanding has led to a number of policy decisions, the results of which we are still trying to either understand or undo. Till the mid nineties New Delhi's attempts to consolidate its influence in the region was actively pursued through a policy of containment. As a policy it failed in two crucial fronts. Firstly it only served to accentuate feelings of mistrust and suspicion between India and its neighbors. Instead of open friendly borders the entire NE was surrounded by elements deeply hostile to Indian interests. Secondly, integration of the region was attempted by containment through force of arms. We perfected the art of double speak by saying "You are a free citizen of Free India and the rifle is there just in case you forget". This attitude managed to create more problems that the ones it sought to solve. Crude and ridiculous calls for mainstreaming the region into the main stream of Indian culture was another stratagem tried. It added to the confusion and chaos as there was neither any such identifiable entity as an Indian Culture and the locals too never saw reason as to why they needed to change their own cultures or to consider them inferior in any way. The policy of containment also attempted appeasement through indiscriminate and liberal funding as a means of containing local frustrations. This was apparently based on the belief that if enough money was pumped into the region its troubles will fade away by themselves. It only helped in fostering corruption and mal governance instead. The North East has a term for such infertile activities. We call them attempts at wrapping a live monkey with banana leaves ! Political gimmicks is the last thing needed when one speaks of NE development.. We have had enough of "outside expert interventions". A Top Down approach for the development of the region has failed. What the region really requires is a Paradigm change in developmental strategy. It now appears that the opportune moment for the introduction of such a change is at hand.

If the advent of the new millennium will at all impact on lifestyles, thinking and policy changes , then India and its North East is where it will happen. The Look East Policy and India's relook at its relations with some of its neighbours and rethink on its strategic sphere of influence will be some of the fallouts of this impact. Some uncharitable soul has labeled the Look East Policy as "India's attempt to keep up with the joneses in its eastern neighborhood by opening up trans-boundary trade through its eastern borders". This perhaps is to simply see the negative aspect of a natural process called Change. Globalisation is change forced upon an International Community because of that community's acceptance of Knowledge Based Information (KBI) as the prime resource / prime cause towards Global Economic development. Technology to improve upon dissemination of Information,which we accept as IT, has now given rise to another process of change - the irrelevance of physical political boundaries, as Electronic Highways criss cross these barriers with impudent disregard for both ideological and diplomatic niceties. I believe that IT has begun the process of a Socio-political change that has just started to impact on mankind. The Look East Policy of India is just one tiny fraction of that process and the NE just another tiny portion of the Earth to be affected by such change. Where it will lead to is totally unknown. A short term prediction is that political boundaries as we know them today will sooner than later become functionally irrelevant and meaningless. In such a scenario, can the NE visualise where it stands ; what will happen to it or for that matter how does it react and interact with its neighbours when such changes occur and take root?

Historically, change for the NE and its people has not always been easy. As a matter of fact for most of the remote and isolated communities of the region, change , especially change imposed from above or outside has always been most painful, traumatic and apprehensive in nature. The only change that took place without any painful side effects for the region and its people, was the surreptitious advancement of education, by itself, a subject worth a PHD or two. At the core however , is the question of Identity and how does change impinge on indigenous Identity. It is an intrinsic feature of the NE and its people which perhaps is never taken into consideration nor recognized by Policy makers at New Delhi. Failure to do so is perhaps responsible for most of the strained relations New Delhi has with the NE. Identity is an issue that affects most of the indigenous people of the region and ironically Central concern expressed through insensitive interventions has simply managed to heighten and aggravate the problem . The fact is that most of us in the region as still paying the price for our inability to correlate Identity with the nature and process of Change. It is a consideration that now more than ever requires the sensitive consideration it demands.

The positive side of the Look East Policy (LEP) lies in the fact that we as a people, as communities of the NE, now have the opportunity of deciding our destinies ourselves and thereby adapting to the process of change on our own terms. Bringing in a Bottom Up, demand driven process of change, maybe with a bit of push from Delhi , might not be such a bad deal after all. No doubt the LEP is also India's attempt to reach out to its Eastern neighbours but lets not forget that the LEP is simultaneously being implemented from other Eastern frontiers of the country, especially from the Eastern Sea coast of India. So change this time for the NE, even if it can be on our own terms, has to take place within a fixed timeframe. Time therefore is no longer a luxury . One recognises the fear of being left behind and its exactly what we should not allow to happen again , simply because we already are the victims of past administrative negligence and political unconcern. The problem of the LEP therefore lies not so much from mainland India's overtures to its Eastern neighbours or the so called presumptuous " keeping up with the joneses", but from the apathy , ignorance and total indifference of the region's political elite and intelligentsia towards the whole concept of change . The regions inept political leadership is totally dependent on Delhi for interpretation of the LEP when actually they should be busy trying to understand it; to comprehend it; spread awareness; rouse curiosity and establish local stakeholdership and ownership over the LEP. To me this is the crux of the problem. It is the pivot on which the whole LEP should revolve around. Of importance is that the LEP should not fly over or simply pass through the region. It must be part and parcel of the region and we must own it! Only then can it be meaningful, sustainable and viable for the people of the NE.

The LEP is a paradigm change that is fast catching up with us and change , as pointed aout above, has always been our Achilles Heel. We need to be more serious on the LEP. "Buck up or Cop Out", a nutshell expression of the situation in its most stark reality. So lets not waste time trying to nitpick the LEP but it will be to our advantage if we tried focusing instead , on how we can latch-on to it as best ,as fast as we can and in our own terms. The region in the interest of its own development must have assets to offer as its own stake and equity in the venture. If the region is to transform itself into a Trans Asian economic hub, then it is imperative to showcase our potentials and the economic rejuvenation we are capable of. But first there is need to identify the foundation or infrastructure on which this NE enterprise is to base itself on. Of primary importance is to recognize the fact that in the North East for almost all NE Tribals, life revolves round their respective communities. Under these circumstances these tribal community institutions must be capacitated and empowered to take decisions on behalf of the community. This is an aspect of Social Capital that is so abundantly found in the region but which has been ignored so far. Training and Capacity building for these institutions then becomes mandatory so as to attain the free, prior and informed consent of the community, and if time and money is to be spend on doing so let it be so. In some countries even the private sector has learnt that supporting Tribal people constitutes good business principles and there is no reason why this cannot happen in the NE as we attempt to push the concept of Globalisation in our look East Policy.

Once social mobilization has taken place over the anticipated aspects of change from the LEP, the assets that the region can offer as its equity then need to be identified. The first item that comes to mind is the NE potential in organic Agricultural production. Most of Upland NE follow Agricultural and Horticultural practices that are organic in nature. The emergence of an increasing Global demand for organic products offers immense potentials for the NE. It is an area we need to concentrate on and gain access to for our Agricultural products. The process of Organic Certification together with Market linkages for organic products need to be seriously looked at and discussed with other stakeholders in this Look East Enterprise we speak of today. There might even be need to review and reassess the conventional approach towards Jhum. Green Revolution technology has proved inappropriate for Up Land cultivation. Can we turn to the wisdom of our forefathers for guidance on how to exploit the new opportunities that now come our way ? Can we start looking at the unique products of the region instead of ignorantly rejecting them as traditional and unscientific? More technological expertise and research is called for as we seek markets for rediscovered skills and occupations.

IT is another area where the NE can excel. The region boasts of a computer literate, English speaking, educated youth cadre. Cyber Connectivity is no longer an issue now and it can easily and quickly be developed in any part of the NE. BPO and IT enabled services are still nascent developments for an era already tagged as The Information Age. The NE can give very competitive offers for the establishment of an International IT hub . Alternately the good English speaking assets of its youth can also be converted into competitive assets. The next area where the NE offers attractive economic prospects is in the development of its IT potentials. The region has excellent communication skills in English , the universal language of a Global computerized world. Educational tourism based on the regions ability to provide cheap but effective IT related English education is another area that can be looked at. There are quite a number of Non English speaking nations who would love to gain access to institutions that could impart capsuled English lessons compatible for IT related activities. Publicity of NE competence on this score can be made through the Public Diplomacy wing of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs , since it has already shown keen interest in the LEP.

Last but not the least the region has to make perspective planning for the effective management of its natural resources . In this context the biggest Natural Resource potential that the region has to offer to the World has to be identified. This offer is based on futuristic projections that are backed up by both geographical and historical facts. It has been said that the 21st century will be known as the century for Fresh Water. Very few dispute this claim or doubt that fresh water will be the most sought after commodity of this century. As such people, communities, regions and states that possess and hold propriety rights over this scarce resource will command the commercial interest and political attention of the whole world. Led by Meghalaya ,the entire NE enjoys the highest precipitation in the world. 12,000 mm annually for Meghalaya alone. It translates into Billions , yes Billions of cusecs of water falling on the region each year. Sooner than later there will be people and nations who will be ready to pay for the fresh water that they need and we should be ready to gratify this need . After the discovery of the Middle East oil fields, the rain soaked hills of the NE will definitely be the next most sought after real estate of the 21st century. It is obvious investments are in order to put in place technologies to conserve, amass and harvest this manna from heaven. We must try to find partners who would be willing to join in with our tryst in what can turn out to be the most sought after commodity of the 21st Century.

The Stillwell Road and India's Look East Policy

E.N. Rammohan

Introduction

"An immense laborious task, unlikely to be finished until the need for it had passed" was Sir Winston Churchill's terse appraisal of the controversial Ledo-Burma road project. Begun in 1942 by US Army engineers, the project seemed an impossibility from the start. First, the stretch of the old Burma war-torn road leading east 600 miles from Mong Yu in North Burma to Kunming in China would have to be repaired and improved for all weather travel. Then a new 500-mile road would have to be carved out of the wilderness from Ledo in Assam to Mong Yu. Eighty percent of the region through which the engineers had to cut their way was in enemy hands. As work on the road progressed, bulldozers frequently carried a man riding shotgun to guard against snipers, nevertheless some 139 engineers were killed by the Japanese. Diseases, drownings, crashes of supply planes and construction accidents claimed the lives of hundreds more. It was said without exaggeration that the road was being built at the cost of a man a mile. All told 28,000 engineers and 35000 native workers laboured for two years to complete the Ledo-Burma road, known officially as the Stillwell road. The road's construction along the edges of 8,500 foot defiles, down steep gorges and across raging rapids in some of the world's most impenetrable jungles-stands as one of the great engineering feats of world war two. On 12 January 1945, the first official convoy pulled out of Ledo for Kunming over the newly finished Ledo road. Commanded

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by General Pick, after almost a month of hard travel over the 1,100 mile route, the convoy rode triumphantly into Kunming. Before the war was over, more than 5,000 vehicles would make the trip, carrying 34, 000 tons of vital supplies to China.[1]

After World War Two, the Stillwell road was virtually abandoned. No one in India thought of any link with Burma or China through this road. The portion from Pangsu pass on the Patkai range leading to Myitkyina was neglected. Some time in the mid nineteen fifties, a group of students from Cambridge University drove two Land Rovers from England to Shillong and then drove up the Patkai Range, crossed the Pangsu pass and drove along the Stillwell road. They soon found the road ahead abandoned, the bridges overwhelmed with creepers and fallen. They managed to carry their two Land Rovers across the smaller streams taking the help of local villagers who ferried the vehicles across by slinging them on *bhaluka banh* (thick bamboos). When they reached the wider rivers and found the bridges fallen, they got the villagers to ferry the vehicles across on rafts. They managed to reach Mong Yu and then finally reached Rangoon and then Singapore. This pioneering expedition stirred little interest in India and the Stillwell road was again forgotten.

Historical Background

It is of interest that the axis of the Stillwell road was probably the same as the ancient southern silk route that linked China with Assam. The Ahoms who came to upper Assam in the early 13th century also probably followed the same axis. The Burmese army that invaded Assam in the early 19th century also probably followed the same axis. The portion of the Stillwell road from the Pangsu pass to Myitkyina has since been improved to some degree by the Burmese government over the years. The road is in use from the Pangsu pass on the Patkai range to Myitkyina a distance of 237 miles, passing through the following towns-Tawaga, Shijnpwinyan, Taronka, Daughnagar, Makaw, Tanai, Tinkok, Shartazyut, Wayazyut, and Mogaung. From Myitkyina to Bhamo it is116 miles and from here to Muse it is 90 miles. At Muse the Stillwell road joins the Burma Road coming from Lashio and going to Kunming. The Chinese have developed the road from Kunming to Lashio and then on to Mandalay. Huge ten wheeled trucks are regularly moving on this section.[2]

India's failure of Foreign Policy on Burma

From the time Burma got its independence, India had very good relations with the Government of U. Nu. The Burmese Army took power in a silent coup in 1962 and finally in 1968 the Army Chief carried out another coup and the military took full control of the country. In 1990, there was an uprising by the civil population against the military rule after the League for Democracy was not allowed to form the government after it won a clear majority of seats in the general elections held. In 1989, it is reported that the Burmese military sent a delegation to Delhi asking for help to build up their armed forces. At that time, the Indian Government probably read them a lecture in democracy. Rebuffed the Burmese delegation returned to Rangoon and opened negotiations with China. In China the Communist party had recovered from the Cultural Revolution and Deng Hsiao Ping had reversed gears and embarked on a path of free enterprise. They had implemented a plan to develop the Kunming area and industrialise it to cater to the South and South-east Asian market. The Chinese welcomed the Burmese delegation and supplied them with all their defence requirements of small arms, armoured vehicles, Artillery, medium patrol boats. They also advanced soft loans of several billion dollars, with easy repayment facilities. The Chinese also developed the portion of the Stillwell road that connected the Kunming area with Lashio and then to Mandalay. Very soon Chinese goods from the Kunming area were rolling down the Stillwell road and flooding the Burmese market. From Mandalay the Burmese already had a road to Kalemyo south of Tamu the border town of Burma opposite Moreh. Soon Chinese goods were flooding the Indian market coming in through several channels, across Moreh in Manipur, from Nepal and entering India at Siliguri, and all along the Nepal border. The Government of India also considerately developed the Tamu Kalemyo road. Along with the goods a sizeable Chinese population has also silently migrated to Burma. Mandalay has become a predominantly Chinese city. Our lack of foresight has cost us dearly. If we had helped the Burmese junta then, Burma would have been to a great degree dependent on us. The Stillwell road should have been taken up for development then. But then at that time we were still in the Public sector mode, while China with a communist government had already privatised.

China is importing raw materials from Myanmar and exporting readymade consumer goods to them. The Chinese town on the China Myanmar border- Rueli is humming with activity. In 2006 4.36 million people and 3,86,000 vehicles passed through Rueli's border crossing carrying 4,75,000 metric tones of cargo. This includes, timber, gems, mineral and oil that go to China. Chinese consumer goods flood Myanmar's markets. Almost everything that Burma buys is from China and almost everything that she sells is to China. Thailand also buys raw material from Burma.[3] Chinese firms are by now involved in about 40 hydropower projects and at least 17 onshore and off shore oil and gas projects in Burma. China has also announced plans to build a 2400 oil and gas pipeline from Arakan to Yunnan.[4] It is fairly obvious that China's grip on Burma is firm. The first reaction therefore, if the Burmese government permits development of the Stillwell road to be taken up by India, will be a backlash of Chinese consumer goods from Rueli to Lashio, Myitkyina and then to the Pangsu pass on the Patkai range and then into India. This will be for a simple reason that the route via Kalemyo to Moreh and Imphal will be too roundabout. When the Stillwell road is opened, we cannot obviously prevent movement of goods from entering legally. We should not hesitate to open the Stillwell road for this reason. We should see that Chinese consumer goods are beaten in competition by Indian goods. Incidentally Chinese consumer goods are already in the Indian market beating Indian goods in competition. Many Indian factories, of toys for example, have closed down because the Chinese toys are of better quality and cheaper despite the long transportation.

Conclusion

What is likely to happen if the Stillwell road is opened? The first development will be a sudden flush of Chinese consumer goods into India. This will probably cut down on smuggling from across the Manipur and Nepal borders. It will be good to encourage direct imports fro China. This will stop the generation of black money that is a product of smuggling. It will also make the private sector in India to strive to beat the Chinese in manufacture of consumer goods. Heroin is already being smuggled into India through Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram. It will now come along the Stillwell road. Detecting and discouraging the smuggling of narcotics is the job of the Border guarding force, the Narcotics Bureau and the Customs. The likelihood of more smuggling of narcotics along the new axis of the Stillwell road should not deter us from opening the road. Opening of the Stillwell road will benefit the economy of the people living on either axis of the road from the Pangsu pass to Myitkyina. Civil supplies, medicines can be easier imported from India to cater for this region than supplied from Rangoon or Mandalay. The whole area will be opened up for tourism from India.

It is mentioned in this regard as to what is in it for Assam and the other northeastern states in opening this road. This is something that the northeastern states' industrial lobby small as it is at present should plan from now. A study should be made to list out what is being imported from China into Burma now. The lobby set up in Assam should then set up industries to manufacture such of those items that can undercut the Chinese supply. India can also import different kinds of gemstones and jade. Also, timber and minerals.

Though the Government of India has been talking of a Look east policy, this has not progressed beyond the idea expressed. Burma is presently in the throes of an internal agitation. After this settles down I think we should talk to the Burmese government and take up the opening of the Stillwell road. The Border Roads developed the Tamu-Kalemyo road in 2000. They should be given the task of opening up the Stillwell road and their flag should be flying on this route from the Pangsa pass to Myitkyina and Lashio by 2010.

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Book-Review

Bangladesh Decoded*

J.N. Roy⁺

For most Indians Bangladesh (BD) remains an enigma. We just cannot understand the anti-India sentiments pervading the attitude of Bangladeshi establishment and society, excepting a small, though significant, section of civil society subscribing to Bangla nationism. This remains inexplicable particularly in view of the positive and active role played by India in creation of BD as an independent nation. In fact, we seem to understand Pakistan better than B.D. Bangladesh is a case of expectations and hopes having gone four following a brief honeymoon (1971-75). Evidently our expectation post 1971 did not factor in the pre-and post partition history of hostility built around the two-nation theory.

"Bangladesh Decoded" a book writen by Shri R.N. P. Singh and published by India First Foundation, will help in better understanding of the well-springs of the causes of adversarial , if not hostile, relationship between the two neighbours. Shri Singh has worked in Intelligence Bureau and has painstakingly brought out and unravelled the factors behind the partition and creation of Pakistan, evolution of East Pakistan into Bangladesh and the events thereafter imparting definitive Islamic bias to the state and society. The book, not only provides an insight into the realities of Bangladesh, but it is hoped, will start an unbiased and healthy debate on understanding a difficult and at times intractable neighbour.

In Bangladesh Decoded Shri Singh has traced the history of growth of Islam in BD and how it has acquired radical hues in recent years. Erstwhile Bengal had, an early brush with islam whose propagation received considerable boost with the establishment a muslim sultanate in 1338. Visiting and resident Sufis, Arab traders and through them

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* Bangladesh Decoded, R.N.P. Singh; New Delhi, India First Foundation, 2007.

⁺ Reviewer: Shri J.N. Roy, IPS (Retd.); former Comissioner , Civil Aviation Security.

5252 close contacts with Saudi Arabia had played a role in spreading Islam in Bengal. However, the rise of assertive political Islam was a later day phenomenon, considerably and deliberately, accentuated by Lord Curzon's partition of Bengal in 1905. With the Muslim league activities and promotion of two-nation theory, the hostility against "Hindu India" as the independence struggle was seen by the League, the muslims of Bengal embraced the theory and after partition the muslim majority eastern part of Bengal became East Pakistan (EP).

Even in 1947 the Islamists in EP had a distinct pride in the Bengali language and culture, which found expression in founding of Awami League in 1948 by Sheikh Mujib and Maulana Bhashani It was in protest against the fears of West Pakistan imposing urdu and its culture on the Bengalis. It was a precursor of what is today called the Bangla nationalism built around Bengali language and culture. However its unintended fall out was the sharp decline of Muslim League in East Pakistan and rise of Jamat-e-Islamic (JEI) to fill in the political space vacated by the former. Thus the foundation for the rise of Islamism and later radical Islam were laid. The rise of JEI was slow, but steady. The Islamic identity forged during the struggle for creation of Pakistan was reinforced by the high esteem Saudi Arabia enjoyed in the psyche of the Muslims of East-Pakistan and muslims of EP/BD since mid 60's hosted an annual congregation of Tabligh Jamaat, which is the second largest in the world after Haj. Despite the growing clout of JEI and other Islamists, the radical Islam's influence was a later day development, particularly after the creation of Bangladesh – which is a real surprise – particularly because the Islamist JEI etc had opposed the independence movement of Awami League and assisted in the brutalities and genocide of the Pak army in 1971.

However, the Islamists staged a comeback even during the life time of Sheikh Mujib with the nationalist fervour giving way to pragmatic international Islamic solidarity. Anti-India propaganda based on allegations of hegemonistic designs of India, inferior treatment given to Mukti Bahini etc had started surfacing. Assassination of Mujabi in 1975 began the gradual decline of influence of Bangla nationalism and rise of Islamists. It culminated in an amendment of the Constitution in 1988 and declaration of Islam as a state religion. Yet another affirmation of the clout of radical Islam was the JEI's growing influence during the two regimes of BNP – 1991-96 and in 2001-2006, – with JEI becoming a coalition partner alongwith Islamic Oikyo Jote (IOJ) another Islamic group with links with the Huji, and JMB (Jamatul Muslim Bangladesh) known terrorist groups.

Infact since 1991 Islamisation of BD society and polity has been steady, protestations of protagonists of Bengali nationalism, notwithstanding. Awami League a secular outfit made the ultimate statement when on the eve of aborted 2007 general elections, it admitted a radical Islamic group (Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish) as its electoral ally to ward-off allegations of soft Islamic credentials.

Shri Singh brings out in detail the fallout of these developments to the security of India's north-east, emasculation of minorities, and persistent denial of illegal migration of Bangladeshis to the adjoining states of India; sheltering of anti-India militants and terrorists in its territory and abetting with the ISI insurgency in North-East India. The Hindu minority in Bangladesh, according to Bangladesh Decoded, which was 31% in 1947 has progressively declined to 19% in 1961, 14% in 1974 and was estimated to be 9% in 2002. Neither India nor the international community has raised an effective voice over this or deliberate and forcible demographic change in Chittagong Hill Tract – where Buddhist Chackmas are being systematically ousted and dispossessed.

These developments; according to Shri Singh, have made BD a hub of radical and fundamentalist Islamic resurgence and terrorism with connivance of the BNP led govt. So much so that till August 2005 the BD govt. and its PM denied existence of dangerous terrorist groups talk the JMB and Huji (B) etc. Only when on August 17, 2005. JMB organised countrywide bombings and earlier attacks on Judges, that the BD govt woke-up and banned them and started taking action. The action – infact followed considerable international pressure to act against the Islamic terrorist groups.

But what should be worrying us is by now well established anti-Indianism of the B.D. establishment including the Army, polity and society. In chapter 7 Shri Singh, recounts various factors, besides the role of fundamentalist JEI, in this phenomenon. Propaganda of Indian hegemonist designs against BD has received a fillip by external players like Pakistan and China in stoking anti-Indianism. Besides the BD Army itself for various reasons is anti-India as it is steeped essentially in Pak army culture. No wonder its intelligence wing DGFI activity collaborates with the ISI in its anti-India designs in promoting insurgency in NE India.

Shri Singh while bringing out these aspects; has not touched upon India's response and reactions to the advent of radical Islam and anti-Indianism in BD. Infact there is considerable amount of ambivalence and confusion in India about BD. There is an informed opinion in India which feels that India has been unfair to a smaller neighbour and should be more accommodative towards its concerns. This section includes, besides liberal intellectuals, some senior Indian diplomats, particularly those who have served in Bangladesh. This section also does not believe that Islamic forces have gained upperhand in the country and that they are anti-India. This viewpoint from the very beginning has been unduly influenced by the Bangla nationalism group which is articulate and has influences in Dhaka and academic institutions. They assest that India must support these "secular elements. Infact their limited interactions with this Bangla groups have blinded them to the emerging realities of BD.

That India should build good relations with BD and encourage secular elements is unexceptionable. But India cannot shut its eyes to the realities and accommodation of concerns cannot be unilateral. Infact the liberals and admirers of Bangla nationalism have resisted adoption of a realistic and pragmatic policy towards BD. These elements mistake what is desirable for reality of BD, which is not so. They are like ostriches who feel bad omens will go away if they did not acknowledge it presence. The fact that the BD govt. does'nt allow India transit rights which was available in East Pak days; it blocks gas/oil pipeline from Myanmar imposing unrealistic conditionalties; it blocks passage of Asian Highway on the ground that it will provide transit facility to India; it negotiates and them dumps offer of Tatas to set up industries etc in BD while welcoming variety of Chinese offers; it systematically discourage, contacts between BD and Indian business houses; it forces Hindu minority either to migrate to India or live in subjugation; it helps anti-India insurgents and refuses to accept illegal migrants from Bangladesh; yet these means nothing to some of us who are blinded by the moderate attitude of Dhaka based literati and liberals. That they have no influence and even the five year rule (1996-2001) of Awami league did not make any difference is of no consequence to these myopic liberals. They overestimate the influence of Bangla liberals, as we did in respect of Pakistan. They have a role but balance favours the other side of BD polity.

All this does not mean that we should not try to improve relations with a diffcult neighbour. It only means that our efforts should be based on a realistic appraisal of the actions and intents of Bangladeshi govt and society and not on make believes. Shri Singh's findings will help in this exercise in realism.

The fact of the matter is that Bangladeshi establishment is still mired in pre-partition mindset vis-à-vis India and advent of radical Islam has only deepened the crisis. In short term, there is no chance of BD giving up its anti-India stance even if we concede all their demands and present these on a platter. They would invent other grievances. It's the mind-set and unless it changes no amount of ersatz bonhomie with the army backed Care Taker Govt. and others is going to help. Pakistan is changing its mind-set, but not Bangladesh. We can only wait but let us not entertain false hopes.

In conclusion; Shri Singh needs to be complimented for his labour in unraveling the emerging true character of the Bangladeshi state and society. More such studies are needed so that we have better understanding of the country. We may not agree with some of his conclusions like Bangladesh having became a hub of radical Islam and terrorism in the region, yet it in no way detracts from the value and merit of the work. On the contrary if it opens a debate. Its an useful addition to books on Bangladesh offering a needed perspective.

Book-Review

The Critical Debate*

Nirmala Joshi[+]

Aptly titled "The Critical Decade" President Nursultan Nazarbayev of the Republic of Kazakhstan has examined a whole gamut of key security issues confronting the world. While these issues are both traditional and unconventional, the focus of the book however is on the latter. The issues are international terrorism and extremism, drug trafficking and transnational crimes and energy security. The present day world is not only a witness to the rise of these powerful and dangerous forces, but has experienced them in large measure as well. They have the capacity to inflict untold miseries and sufferings on human kind. Several nations have been affected by these challenges and threats, and Kazakhstan is no exception. What is noteworthy about the book is that Nazarbayev has attempted to examine these challenges and threats from a historical perspective and juxtaposed them against the growing trend of globalization. What is of equal significance is that Nazarbayev has also given a thought to their solutions and has made some thought provoking suggestions. Kazakhstan's efforts to combat these dangers have been highlighted such as establishing the necessary legal, political and administrative framework.

The thrust of the book appears to be to widen and deepen the parameters of security. Since the unconventional challenges and threats are basically non-State and transnational in character, collaborative efforts among nations are absolutely essential. The issue of energy security has both traditional and non-traditional characteristics and Nazarbayev on this issue has focused on the Caspian Sea region. In his view the Caspian Sea region is the core of both competition among major and regional powers as well as that of religious extremism.

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* The Critical Decade, Nursultan Nazarbayev, London, First Books, 2003.

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Multinational companies from the following countries are involved here and they are US – 11 companies, Japan – 5, England – 4, France and Turkey – 3 each, Norway – 2, Italy, Germany, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, Finland, Argentina, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and others – 1 apiece (p. 115). Transportation network and laying the export pipelines infrastructure are weaving nations close to each other, than ever before. In the process regions are getting interlinked with each other and therefore challenges and threats may not be region specific but they do have the capacity to influence other regions as well. In this changing perception the meaning of regional security as well as that of regional security organizations will also undergo a change.

The existing security groupings in the Central Asian region may prove inadequate in the circumstances, according to Nazarbayev. Earlier the text and spirit of the Collective Security Treaty made no mention of measures to be used in cases of conflict between member States. The focus was mainly on protecting the external borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (p. 125). The Collective Security Treaty has evolved into a regional security alliance, while the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has ensured stability and peace on the common borders of some Central Asian States with China. However, the SCO in Nazarbayev's view "has turned out to be ineffective in the fight against other threats" (p. 137). In his opinion the Anti Terror Coalition has filled in an important gap in regional security and has been able to take effective measures to stabilize the situation. In the opinion of Nazarbayev "In the future we should consider the importance of forming a continental coalition on the basis of the Convention on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) for combating extremism, that apart from Central Asia will include the crisis regions of South Asia and the Middle East" (pp. 69-70). Indeed as rightly observed by Nazarbayev the time has come to broaden the parameters of security as well as that of existing regional groupings, if they are to be effective.

On the question of international terrorism and its rapid spread in this century can be attributed to several factors. Some of these are political radicalization of both right and left wing sections, unchecked migration, economic disparity in the regions of the world. Nazarbayev has suggested that nations should set aside at least one percent of their military target for the welfare of poor and underdeveloped regions. An idea that he put forth in the United Nations General Assembly. On the other hand terrorism has grown partly because of organizational efficiency and sophistication of militant groups and partly because of the external support such groups receive especially financial support. For instance, Nazarbayev points out that for a period of eight months in 2002 there were 390 acts of terrorism in which 4776 innocent people were killed. Nazarbayev opines that "Islamic terrorism and extremism have become synonymous with each other, although there is no aggression in the teachings of Islam itself" (p. 29). In Kazakhstan extremism and terrorism, though on a low key, has a presence. In South Kazakhstan and Zhambyl oblasts "Tabligi Dzhamaat" and Hizbut Tahrir are active. These militant groups preach intolerance and hatred toward other faiths. In view of the escalating violence it is essential, in Nazarbayev's view, to broaden the zone of security. Kazakhstan's effort to launch the CICA initiative is a step in this direction at the regional level. While at the national level efforts to strengthen the legal and administrative framework have been intensified.

A significant dimension of terrorism is the rise of fundamentalism. In trying to understand this phenomenon, Nazarbayev has brought to the readers notice the philosophical underpinnings. He observes " … a new danger is emerging – the lack of critical thinking. For many people it is convenient and customary to perceive in stereotypes. Bold and extraordinary thinking of an individual is giving way to so called mass perceptions" (p. 49).. An outcome is ideas like the clash of civilization have become popular, though it has been widely contested. On the other hand, it has also given an impetus to fundamentalism. Today fundamentalism can be sufficiently powerful to determine the social and economic life and even the pillars of a country (p. 56). In Kazakhstan religious extremism has never been a strong factor. Renowned Sufi scholar Hodja Ahmed Yassawi worked relentlessly for harmony between Islamic teachings and the pagan customs of Kazakh tribes. Kazakhstan is a secular state and its people are Sunni Muslims but they have never been fanatics. The benevolent impact of Sufism perhaps explains this fact. For the present the challenge of extremism in Kazakhstan is a low key, nevertheless it cannot be discounted. Nations should not lower their guard. In fact, it is necessary to strengthen efforts at all levels to meet this challenge.

Drug Trafficking has emerged as the major problem for all the Central Asian countries. Central Asia is one of the major transit routes to the markets in Europe. The emergence of Afghanistan as the centre for opium and heroin has impacted on neighbouring Central Asian region. Unwittingly, improvements and developments in transportation have facilitated trafficking. The most worrisome fact is that consumption along the transit route has increased, perhaps more than the consuming areas of Europe. In a candid admission Nazarbayev has stated that there are 45,505 people including 1927 adolescents and 4420 women who have been registered for drug abuse in Kazakhstan (p. 81). In the course of the chapter Nazarbayev has outlined the measures taken by his government to deal with this danger. The chapter is full of interesting information which the reader will find it useful.

The issue of energy security in the Caspian Sea region has been dealt with in a competent manner. In Nazarbayev's thinking " ... the Caspian strategic stability in the mid term will depend not on hydrocarbon or ecological factors, but on a change in the geopolitical situation around it" (p. 96). This is a thought-provoking proposition. The Caspian region is now a part of the Eurasian economy which is currently taking shape. It has significant potential given the development of regional cooperation. Nazarbayev is of the view that in future "it will be imperative to give Caspian problems due consideration at the CICA". Further he has suggested, "The creation of Caspian regional anti-terrorist structures is also ripe for discussions" (emphasis added). Briefly attempts at Central Asian regional cooperation and Kazakhstan's initiatives and efforts have also been discussed. The current one being Central Asian Economic Community.

Experts and students of international affairs will find the book valuable. It gives an in-depth understanding of Kazakhstan's views on issues that are of critical importance to India as well.

Poetry as Satyagrah: A Gandhian Reading of Les Murray's "Walking to the Cattle Place"

Sudhir Kumar*

The present essay is an attempt to read Les Murray's important poem "Walking to the Cattle Place" through Gandhi's vision of art, action and aesthetics. It is important to note that, in the Gandhian world-view, human life as well as art, if it has to meaningfully contribute to the greatest good of all (*sarvodaya*), should represent or address truth (*satyam*), the *lok-sangraha* (the public good) and sundaram (the beautiful)-which are mutually inseparable values, existing in a creative continuum or *samavaya*. Similarly, *satyagrah* as holding on to truth-force, in the Gandhian world-view, enables an individual (a political activist or a writer/artist alike) to non-violently resist injustice, exploitation, inequality and violence prevailing in a society at a particular time.

To a writer, her/his text becomes the means or the site where her quest for truth (*satya*), *swaraj* (self-rule - both political meaning freedom and spiritual meaning self-knowledge or *atma-bodh*) and concerns for the universal welfare (*shivam* or *sarvodaya*) are aesthetically represented leading to the aesthetic experience (*rasa*) of the beautiful (*sundaram*) and bliss (*ananda*). It is in this sense the very process of writing poetry/literature is a satyagrah or an embodiment of truth-force – which enables a writer not only to represent her/his protest against the prevailing injustice and infliction of violence but also to aesthetically reconstruct an alternative space or reality where the writer as well as the reader become one — sharing an indescribable (*anirvachaniya*) aesthetic experience (*rasa*) or *ananda* (bliss).

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Les Murray is an eminent contemporary Australian writer/poet whose poetry may well be considered as a perpetual quest for truth or satyagrah in the context of increasing injustice, materialism, spiritual emptiness, violence and exploitation in contemporary Australia in particular and in the world at large in general.

Leslie Allan Murray was born in 1938 in the Manning River district of the lower north coast of New South Wales. He spent his childhood and adolescence on his grandfather's family farm in the nearby Bunyah district where he still lives. He studied at Sydney University and later became a translator at the Australian National University and an officer in the Prime Minister's Department. After 1971, he made literature his full-time career. His important books of poetry include – The Ilex Tree (1965), Poems Against Economics (1972), The Vernacular Republic (1976), Lunch and Counter lunch (1975), The Boy Who Stole The Funeral (1980), The People's Otherworld (1984), Translations from the Natural World (1993), The Daylight Moon (1987), Dog Fox Field (1990) and a verse-novel- Fredy Neptune (1998). Not only his books but also some of the titles of his works easily tempt a careful reader to read his poetry through Gandhi. For example, such terms as "against economics", "vernacular republic", "The people's otherworld" and "translations from the natural world" etc., lend an unmistakable Gandhian flavour to his poetry of truth and non-violence. Translated into the Gandhian aesthetics, Murray's "vernacular republic" would become "gram-swaraj"(eco-friendly-village-republic) , his " against economics" would resemble "swadeshi and swaraj", and his "people's otherworld" would become "*sarvodaya* or *antyodaya*" (universal welfare or unto this last)- all embedded in the spiritual values of *satya* (truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence).

In order to attempt a Gandhian reading of Les Murray's poetry, let us begin by analyzing his two recent statements about his poetry :-

"Poetry is the best means to make clear what we mean by sacred. Each of us live inside a poem which is sacred to us. It could be the poem of a job a marriage. We enjoy its myths and legends. Poetry celebrates experience. It is visceral and immediate. It is like dreaming and thinking and dancing all in the same instance." (Murray, "Interview" p. 6).

"I encounter a lot of open ridicule in the west about religion. But it is not easy to dismiss the existence of god in the light of human experience. I do believe in God. Religion is all about taking us closer to salvation. But when we forget this fundamental fact, we start cutting each other's throats in the name of our gods". (Murray, "Interview" p. 6).

Gandhi also relates art to the sacred or the spiritual in its widest sense that subsumes the so-called secular space also:-

"Productions of man's art have their value only insofar as they help the soul towards self-realization". (Gandhi, 1924). Murray also, in a way, seems to connect the outward as reflected in a poem (the text) to its internal context (the articulation of the spiritual or the sacred) like Gandhi. According to Gandhiji the external and the internal domains of art are mutually complementary:-

There are two aspects of things – the outward and the inward. The outward has no meaning except insofar as it helps the inward. All true art in thus the expression of the soul. The outward forms have value only sofar as they are the expression of the inner spirit of man (Gandhi, 1924).

In his poem, "Poetry and Religion" (CP, 267). Murray a la Gandhi connects poetry to religion or spirituality:- "Religions are poems./ They concert our daylight and dreaming mind, our/ emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture/ into the only whole thinking : poetry. (CP 267) and further still he clarifies his (Gandhian) position:- "God is the poetry caught in any religion,/ caught, not imprisoned./ There will always be religion around while/ there is poetry". (CP 267). Moreover, on the issue of the centrality of religion (dharma) and the significance of civilization values endangered by the mindless march of consumerist, techno-modernity, Gandhiji is on the side of Les Murray:

Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which changes one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies (Gandhi, 1920).

Gandhiji's firm faith in God truth is also echoed in Les Muray's poems. Gandhiji rightly says: "To me, God is Truth and Love ; God is ethics and morality; God is fearlessness. God is the source of light and life and yet He is above and beyond all these" (Gandhi, 1925).

Both Gandhi and Murray are , therefore, show their concerns for the rural poor and environment, their protest against the godless, valueless western modernity and their emphasis on the preservation of civilizational moral/ethical values.

The present essay is, therefore, a modest and tentative endeavour to read Les Murray's poems as a satyagraha (holding on to truth or soul force in the Gandhian sense) against injustice, violence, exploitation and untruth. In other words, Murray's poetry is a satyagraha or non-violent crusade for establishing a society where *dharma* (moral duty), self-realisation (*atmabodh* or salvation), *satya* (truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence) are considered the cardinal virtues.

II. Poetry as Satyagrah Against Valueless Modernity :

While writing the manifesto of the Australian Commonwealth Party – *A Focus of Vision*, Murray critiques the modern civilization based on the abuse of technology and its dehumanizing impact on the contemporary culture and society. He proposed that the Australian Commonwealth Party would make:-

> A start on the work of eliminating all exploitative and exhaustive techniques from the Australian economy. No Luddite reversion to the past advocated here; bad greed – motivated, typically violent technology must be replaced in great party, by the development of good ecologically responsible technology. We cannot and should not destroy the Machine – we must civilize it. (Bourke, 82).

Like Murray, Gandhiji also wanted to civilize the modern science and technology by making it a means of creating an eco-friendly and non-violent society free from hunger and want. In a way, Gandhiji's project was to "civilize" or "spiritualise" science and modernity both.

That's why, Murray asks us in his poem "SMLE" to "evade the modernities" (Murray, 41). Murray criticizes the destructive impact of modern civilization on the millions of people:- "The onrush of modern technological development has unseated million of people from their older centeredness in religious faith." (Murray, 1978, p. 52). Similarly, Gandhiji, in his Hind Swaraj (1908), critiqued the modern western civilization because of its emphasis on the multiplication of desires and amoral nature as "satanic":-

> The civilization is irreligion, and it has taken such a hold on the people in Europe that those who are in it appear to be half and.... This civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed. Hinduism calls it the Black Age. (Gandhiji, 1953, 33-34).

Like, Murray, Gandhiji too decried the dehumanizing and destructive use of machines in modern civilization:- "Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin." (Gandhi, 1995, p 83). And, furthermore, Gandhiji warned against the impact of the predominance of machines in a country like India:-"How can a country with crores of living machines afford to have a machine which will displace the labour of crores of living machines? It would spell their unemployment and their ruin" (Gandhi, 1935).

Like Murray, Gandhi is also not a Luddite in his condemnation of machinery. In Young India (Nov. 13, 1924), Gandhiji criticized the use of machinery to serve human greed:-

> What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on 'saving labour' till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation....... Scientific truths and discoveries should first of all cease to be mere instruments of greed.

Throughout his life, Gandhiji emphasized the difference between the Western (modern) civilization and the spiritually oriented Indian civilization:-

> Modern civilization is chiefly materialistic as ours is chiefly spiritual. Modern civilization occupies itself in the investigation of the laws of the matter and employs the human ingenuity in inventing or discovering means of production of weapons of destruction, ones is chiefly occupied in exploring spiritual laws (Gandhi, 1934, 329).

Murray's early collections of poetry, The Ilex Tree (1965), The Weatherboard Cathedral (1969) and Poems Against Economics (1972) symbolize an alternative rural cultural space which offers hope to the people who are struggling against the aftermath of a misplaced and valueless modernity in Australia and elsewhere.

Similarly, his intertextual "Walking to the Cattle Place" (Murray, 1994, 55-57) included in his collections – Weatherboard Cathedral (1969) and Poems Against Economics (1972), is based on the re-working of the Indic mythical metaphors of Prithu, the king and the civilizationally loaded signifier- "go" or "cow". The poem that resonates with many significant references to the Indian archetypes is structured into fifteen sections. The first one is titled "Sanskrit" and the fifteenth is named "Goloka" (the Earth) whereas the other sections such as "The names of the People", "Death Words", "The Commonwealth of Manu" and "The Boeotian Count" are also replete with value-loaded terms central to the spiritual semiotics of Hindu philosophy – which was also used by Gandhiji in his political movements.

Murray refers to Gandhi in his parodically subversive poem – "The Dream of Wearing Short Forever" (CP, 234) – "They are never Robes/as other bare leg outfits have been/the toga, the kilt, the lava-lava/the Mahatma's cotton dhoti". Murray wants to subvert the dominant craze for a hollow and hypocritical modernity which decries the wearing of shorts. Murray candidly refers to Gandhi's self-conscious choice to counter western modernity and imperialism by wearing a "cotton-dhoti" as "half-naked fakir" (to borrow Winston Churchill's remark). Murray's "shorts" (though existing in a dream-state) and Gandhi's "Cotton dhoti" become the objective correlatives of their non-violent struggle (satyagrah) for truth and freedom. Les Murray longs to wear "shorts" to identify with those who exist on the margins of modernity whereas Gandhi himself self-consciously wore "cotton-dhoti" and "khadi" in order to identify with the so-called subaltern or the deprived in the Indian society and also to resist the temptations of western civilization.

Apart from his "Walking To The Cattle Place", Murray's other poems such as "The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever" (included in Daylight Moon – 1987), "At Thunderbolt's Grave in Uralla" and "Poetry and Religion" also articulate his growing unease with modernity and its impact on the rural, aboriginal life in Australia and foreground his faith in the grounding of poetry in the spiritual/religious matrix or context.

III. Murray's "Walking To the Cattle Place": Its Etymology, Mythology and Politics of Satyagrah:-

About the genesis of the poem, "Walking To The Cattle Place", Murray talks about the Indo-European etymology of the word "Cow/go" which is pregnant with profound symbolical meanings :-"It is really an etymological sequence as much as any thing else. It was sparked off by realizing from linguistic studies that the oldest root we can trace in Indo-European languages is "Cow" (Crawford 27).

Interestingly in Sanskrit, the cattle place (or shelter for cattle) is called "gotra" (Williams, 364) which also means-family, race, lineage, the family name, caste, class, group (Williams 364; Apte, 353). The word "go" in Sanskrit is a loaded signifier – the significations of which connote a whole world-view which was based on the pastoral, simple, agricultural rural Boeotian way of life. Go-which stands for a cow as well as cattle or a herd of cattle is a polyphonic word symbol in Sanskrit that implies the following (Williams 363-369) :-

a. to set out for a battle b. milk c. flesh d. sky e. stars f. moon g. horse h. water i. the earth j. a mother k. speech (Saraswati).

Murray himself aptly comments on the semiotic significance of "go/cow" – "I set out to follow a cow and I found a whole world, a specious, town-despising grassland where Celt and Zulu and Verdic Aryan were one in their concerns" (Wilde et al, 2000 p. 560).

Incidentally, the English word "cow" also comes from Indo-European 'go'. That is why, Murray names the first section of the poem – "Sanskrit" which begins with an evocative, vivid picture of the non-modern, pastoral/rural world:-"Upasara, the heifer after first mating,/

adyasvina, the cow about to calve, strivatsa, /the cow who has borne a heifer calf (atrinada/ the calf newly born). I will smuggle this sutra." (CP 55).

In the vedic/Indian way of life, "upasara" stands for the first calf from first mating as well as a bull's longing for a cow (Apte, 212). Upasaranam, its another derivative, means to go towards somebody/ something". "Adyasvina" implies a woman about to give birth to a child (Apte, 23) whereas "Strivatsa'" implies the infant she-calf or girl-child which comes from "vatsa" (calf, child, Apta, 893). From "vatsa" comes "Vatsala" (Apte 893) meaning one who loves children or affectionate or loving. "Sutra," in Sanskrit, means "aphoristic sentence/ definition" (Apte, 1119) whereas "sutrika" (Apte 1119) denotes the coir used to tie cattle. Interestingly, the poet wants to smuggle this "sutra" or talisman or mantra to create an alternative rural, simple way of life, so well epitomized by Gandhi in his notion of "Swaraj", in the midst of mind-boggling materialism. Murray, in the very first lines of the poem, strikes the key-note of his poetic "satyagrah"- his quest for a non-violent society made by simplicity and eco-friendly existence.

The poet-narrator by identifying himself with this god-centric, spiritual and pastoral early-vedic world, longs for its preservation:-"I will wake up in a world that hooves have led to". (CP, 55)

Murray in "Walking to the Cattle Place" also suggests a common, (the so-called ancient) cultural heritage of Europe and Asia (including Australia) as it is evident from the dissemination of the linguistic legacy: "To be of Europe also is a horn-dance/cattle-knowledge. Even here, where Europa/dumped rusty in her disgrace, gathered childhood afresh/ by the dray wheel's mercy, on creeks of the far selections" (C.P., 56). But the poet is conscious of the disruption of this simple, god-centric "way of life" or "alternative culture" which is based on the symbiotic existence with nature, because : "Today for no sin much, neither killing a brahmin/ nor directly a cow, I will follow cattle" (CP 56).

Apparently enough, the so-called civilized, progressive society sanctions violence against cows as well as Brahmins – that were considered sacred in the Vedic society. According to Manu, the brahmins are expected to lead a life of minimalistic needs and to disseminate true knowledge : " For Brahmins, he ordained teaching, sacrificing for themselves and sacrificing for others, giving and receiving" The Laws of Manu, Chapter 1, 88 p.12-13).Similarly, only those who practiced in their conduct "restraint of mind, restraint of senses, penance, cleanliness, endurance, guilelessness, knowledge , realization, faith in scriptures"(The Gita, Ch. XVIII.42,p. 587) were called " Brahmanas" in the ancient Vedic society. Thus , nobody was a born Brahmana- - brahaminhood was to be earned through the practice of the virtues and values as mentioned in the preceding quote from the Gita. Likewise," agriculture, rearing of cattle, and trade are the works of the Vaishyas"(The Gita, Ch.XVIII. 44,p.583), whereas those who exhibited in their conduct such qualities as " courage, power, resolution, skill, non-flight from the battle and generosity" were to be called the Kshatriyas(The Gita, Ch. XVIII.44,p.588). Those who performed service or menial service to the other three varnas were called Shudras (The Gita, Ch.XVIII.44, p.588). It was this non-hierarchical, non-violent division of human society grounded in the inevitable differences of aptitudes, approaches, abilities, qualities and professions that was suggested in the *Purush Sukta* in the Rigveda or the eighteenth chapter of the Gita as the varna system. Murray in his poem laments the absence from our society of true Brahmins- who are committed to the production and dissemination of knowledge. Murray, in accordance with the Gita and Manu, does nor confuse varna system with its latter-day corrupt form called "caste or jati system".

Similarly, Murray's poem may also be read as an ode to cow-protection- in which a cow metonymically stands for all innocent beings and our fragile eco-system already under a grave threat from the growing consumerist culture of our day. Gandhiji like Murray also considers the cow as a "poem of pity" and a symbol of the lower order of creation:-

> The cow is a poem of pity. One reads pity in the gentle animal. She is the mother to millions of Indian mankind. Protection of the cow means the protection of the whole dumb creation of God. The appeal of the lower order of creation is all the more forcible because it is speechless. (Young India, Oct. 6,1921)

In this imagined cattle republic or "goloka" (the earth), the humans as well as the cattle were not to be subjected to exploitation and violence. There was punishment reserved for those who inflicted violence on humans or animals : "The king should impose a fine in direct proportion to the amount of pain caused when someone strikes men or animals to give them pain" (LM, Ch. 8. 286 p.183).

The poet's imaginary "goloka" is destroyed by the "wall street tremor", the red-shift on "the flesh-eating graphs" and by the ghastly spectacle of "how ghostly cows must be crowding the factory floors now" (CP 56). The Vyanjana or suggestion effected by the poet is that the vice of human greed and lust for immorally-earned profit and power are responsible for the depletion of our sustainable environment and the destruction of our symbiotic co-existence with nature including the animal world. It is this vedic world-view which does not admit of such divisions/partitions of the world as are connoted by the asymmetrical power blocks viz. the rural and the global "there is no life more global than a village". (CP 57).

Interestingly, in the famous *Prithvi Sukta* or *Bhoomi Sukta* (*The Earth Mantra*) of the *Atharvaveda* (Ch. 12 verse 1-63), the Vedic seers, like Les Murray, imagined a nation not as a politico-economic community but as the civilizational space which was not divided into the politically and economically expedient units of the local, the natural and the animal world. In this civilizational space, the human beings are supposed to live in complete harmony with the animal and the natural world according to the Prithvi Sukta. The Vedic seer has used "Cow/go" metaphor about ten times in this sukta to refer to mutually interdependent, symbiotic relationship between the resources of the earth and its praja or people. The seer, therefore, imagines this "cow/earth/go" to be his "mother" – "our mother is the earth; we are the off springs of the earth" (Atharvaveda, Prithvi Sukta" 12.12) In his poem, "Migratory" (CP,395), Murray's poet-persona identifies with the "nest", "the egg", "the beach", "the food", "the shade", "the right feeling", "the wrongness of here", "the crying heads to fill", "the sand" and all other forms of nature showing the oneness or advaita of being – a state in which "I" becomes all and all "I". Les Murray's poem "Walking To The Cattle Place" is an ode to this Vedic vision of the good society. The Vedic word "go" when it means cattle is in plural number as it connotes a sense of property-("Cattle is chattel, is owned" CP 58). The Sanskrit derivative "gotra" also means "property" (Apte, 364). Murray invokes the Prithu myth (Apte, 633) of Hinduism in order to foreground the dependence of humankind on the optimum and the ethical use of the earth-resources and sets it off against an exploitative modern civilization "the seed-eater towns" that go on plundering our natural resources:- "but we could still find common knowledge, verb roots/and noun bark, enough for an evening fire of sharing,/Cattle-wisdom/though it is a great year yet/till Prithu will milk from the goddess..../ and down through his fingers into the rimmed vessel earth/grain and food gardens./ We are entirely before/ the seed-eater towns (CP, 58-59)

Hence "go" or "cow" serves as metonymy suggesting an alternative world free from the taint of greed and violence as suggested by Gandhi and Murray. Gandhiji says:- "Cow-protection, to me, is one of the most wonderful phenomena in human evolution. It takes the human being beyond his species. The cow to me means the entire sub-human world. Man, through the cow, is enjoined to realize his identity with all that lives." (Gandhi, 1921). Thus, there is hope for humanity for sustainable, environment-friendly growth so long as we continue to value our "verb roots', "noun barks' and " evening fire of sharing" and "cattle-wisdom"- which create a *samavaya* (an inseparable union) of all beings in an ethical and integrated existence.

The Prithu myth (as narrated in the Bhagavadapurana) used by Les Murray in the poem is significant for enlarging the scope and appeal of the poem. In Indian mythology Prithu was the first king of the earth (Apte, 633) and "Prithvi" or the earth was so named often him. When his own people were dying of famine, he forced the earth to yield fruits and vegetables for sustenance. The earth took the form of a cow and started running away from Prithu who kept on following it. The cow (the earth) surrendered and promised to yield the necessary fruits, grains and vegetables for the people only if he provides it with a heifer in order to make it yield milk. Prithu made Swaayambhu Manu the heifer and milked the cow (the earth). The Prithu myth in the modern context, as suggested and re-contextualised by Les Murray in his beautiful poem, is of crucial significance to all our development and welfare economists who through their empirical graphs and theories, wish to peddle their logic of sustainable and environment friendly development from the air-conditioned and insulated cabins of the Planning Commission. But this longed-for pastoral world of "verb roots" , "noun bark" and "cattle wisdom" is on the brink of extinction- thanks to the rabid growth of industries and consumerist culture.

The cows (or the cattle) are now being led to be slaughtered to satisfy man's greed for cash and profit :- "They are going to the plains of cash and the captive bolt /......: they are chilled from dripping/and marbled in their fat they are pillars of the city/till out of cool rooms they crowd into are view" (CP 60). In other words, these lines signify Murray's concern about the exploitation of the earth-resources and destruction of nature to pander to human greed in the context of the so-called economic globalization. The sixth section of the poem entitled "The Commonwealth of Manu" deals with the four fold division of human (also Australian) society on the basis of professional/occupational qualities – (and not on the basis of heredity or birth as it happens in the caste system). The poet uses the Hindu/Indian varna-framework to designate the composition of Australian society. "just for moment/it seemed true of our country equally./ Brahmin, Kshatriya Vaishya, Shudra /the four castes in our country, too plus such as myself/and the black man" (CP, 62) Contrary to the hugely mistaken belief, the ancient vedic (Hindu) society was divided into four varnas (not castes) on the basis of human qualities or gunas (and not on the basis of heredity or birth – The Laws of Manu, 232-233, 243). Like Murray, Gandhiji also visualizes the varna-system as a strategy for the management of different duties, obligations, and functions on the basis of people's qualities, occupations, and aptitudes, without connoting untouchability or gradation of social prestige or power. He says – "Varnashrama is not a vertical line, but that it is a horizontal plans on which all the children of God occupy absolutely the same states, though they may be engaged in different pursuits of life and though they may have different qualities and different tastes." (Harijan, Feb 18, 1933). The degeneration of varna into the so called hereditary "caste – system" fraught with power-relations and infliction of violence and inequality is a later story consequent upon the socio-cultural decline of the early Vedic society. Les Murray uses the varna-division to characterize the sinister dominance of the Vaishyas (the modern-day capitalists or business tycoons, the controllers of trade and commerce , the big agriculturalists) in the modern civilization:-

"Vaishya, though merchant, lowest of the twice-born,/ consider his dominance:/ the whole nation turning on him/ the government his the laws, his the profits/, his system the System./ All his, the glory of goods,/ to make silent the rivers, to level the untidy hills/ a dispensation not found in the laws of Manu" (CP 62)

Thus, the greedy merchant or the late capitalist class is termed the debased vaishya by Murray. In these lines quoted above, Murray underlines his critique of the unethical economization of the human existence- which is the sole guiding force behind the so-called "globalisation" in the world today. Murray and Gandhi both fear the rapid transformation of the desired good society into a goods society propelled by greed and consumerism.

In the Hindu tradition, *artha* (or the generation and enjoyment of wealth) is , indeed, one of the cardinal principles of life (*purusharthas*) — *dharma* (variously described as moral law ,duty, or ethical obligation), *artha* (generation and enjoyment of wealth), *kama* (sexual desire) and *moksha* (final liberation). But *artha*, like other *purusharthas* has to be subservient to *dharma*, if one has to lead a peaceful and contented existence. That is why, Murray and Gandhi both find fault with the unethical techno-modernity that destroys the moral health of society and endangers the whole eco-system. But the modern-day vaishya instead of believing in the glory of good (ness), works only the glory of goods – which is not enjoined upon him by Manu:-

When a commoner (vaishya) has undergone the transformative rituals and married a wife, he should constantly dedicate himself to making a living and tending livestock. ...... He should know the high or low value of gems, pearls, ... He should know how to sow seeds, ... and the worth or worthlessness of a merchandise, the good or bad qualities of countries, the profit and loss from trades....... And he should know the various languages of men, the way to preserve goods and buying and selling. He should make the utmost efforts to increase his goods by means in keeping with the duty and take pains to give food to all creatures (LM ch.9 verses no. 326-333 p. 232).

The dominance of the valueless (adharmik) greed-driven Vaishya community(the late capitalists) is the cause of so many undesirable social, economic and political changes in the history of modern world. Slavery, racism, colonialism, imperialism, indenture-system, pax Britannica, pax Americana, etc are the dark chapters of human history which expose what unbridled human greed could do to humanity. Murray also takes a dig at the popularity of Ganesha among the Vaishyas as Ganesha "the greedy one" is an "overcomer of obstacles" (vighnesh) (CP 62).

The tenth section:- "The Boeotian Count" presents the image of an alternative rural society to a reader where even the pretense to academic learning is abandoned in order to emphasize the centrality of action or Karma which is a form of *lila* (bliss, play or sport, Apte, 880):-

"I pray that Hughie./will send you/safe home/ where ploughing is playing/where karma is Lila". (CP 67)

It is this vision of an alternative society and culture so ably informed by the notions of "Karma"(right actions) and "Lila" that remains at the core of Murray's imagined Boeotian society. According to the Gita , it is only through actions or works (Karma) that the welfare of all on the earth (loksangrah) can be realized:- "Janaka and others achieved perfection through works alone. At least, to promote the welfare of the world, you ought to do works" (The Gita ch.3.20, p. 116).

But, as Murray suggested, Karma or action can only be "lila" or sport when performed with detachment as has also been outlined in the Gita. In the second chapter of the Gita (verses- 47 & 48), Lord Krishna exhorts Arjuna to perform works or actions with detachment in a state of equanimity of mind in order to attain true happiness in life:-

To works alone have you the right and never to the fruits of works. Don't be impelled by the fruits of works ; at the same time, don't be tempted to withdraw from works. Giving up attachment and established in Yoga, with evenness of mind in success and failure, perform works, O Arjuna, this evenness is Yoga. (Ch.2.47 and 48, p. 69).

Gandhiji also believed in the theory of detached action or nishkama karma:-

"I firmly believe in the Law of karma, but I believe too in human endeavour. I regard as the summum bonum of life the attainment of salvation through Karma by annihilating its effects by detachment" (Gandhiji, 1928).

Gandhiji understood that only detached action can become lila or play which is the real meaning of freedom:-

"That person who works without attachment is free, that is, he is not bound by the effects of karma." (Gandhi quoted in Hingorani, 1985). In the twelfth section "Hall's Cattle", Murray again attacks the inhumane modern civilization and the hegemony of American consumerist culture:- "They will sentence me next time/they have sentenced our sort/and all I know is this life/I know nothing of America" (CP, 69). In the section "Boopis", Murray self-consciously juxtaposes "the earth" with "cow" :- "Coming out of reflections/I find myself in the earth/My cow going on..."(CP 70)

Thus, his reflections on "go" or "cow" -centric world signify his continuing satyagrah for an eco-friendly, non-violent world in which humans, animals and the vegetal world –all exist in an existential and ethical harmony. And the continuous nurturance of this "connection" between the animal, the vegetal and the elemental world is vital for the survival of the mankind on this planet. This poem- " Walking To The Cattle Place" re-affirms Murray's faith in Gandhian Swaraj in which the human and the natural forms of creation are at peace, or, in harmony with each other.

The last section of the poem "Goloka" (in Sanskrit – the earth) is also the largest section of the poem in which the poet re-iterates his commitment to dharma (moral duty) to transform this materialistic, consumerist world into a "goloka" (Murray's vision of the good society or swaraj). The rural people of peasants/aborigines use their "speech" (yet another meaning of "go") to rename their places in accordance with their tradition. Though the maddening march of modern civilization has numbed the finer human instincts and destroyed the integrated existence, the poet re-asserts his commitment to satyagrah (holding on to truth) amidst confusion and chaos:- "The ancient tune is faint (fainter still, the kings in her/but it keeps me farming./rather than raping, or embalming the land". (CP , 74).

Surrounded by all sorts of materialistic shares, a citizen of Murray's "Goloka" will continue to "Farm" the land in order to connect with the mother earth ("go"). This is his satyagrah in the Gandhian sense. Gandhiji also said, "Our civilization, our culture, our swaraj depend not upon multiplying our wants – self indulgence, but upon restricting our wants".(Young India, Feb. 23,1921).

But the peasants or the rural people who live in harmony with environment will not "be peasants again" in the "New World" (CP 74) – which is based on the principles of greed and unethical profit. Murray in a way, defines his "Swaraj" (good society) in a telling way which readily reminds an Indian reader of Gandhi's vision of swaraj based on the spiritual values of Indian civilization:-"I am looking at equality where it seeks no victories" (CP 76) Or where "The king of justice (human) would not enter paradise without the lost, or his dog/living and work are one thing." (CP 76).

By referring to an event associated with Yudhistihira, the Pandava king (in the Mahabharata) who was also called the incarnation of dharma (moral law) and who refused to enter heaven without his dog, Murray has tried to show the centrality of dharma (the moral law or duty) in his swaraj (or goloka). When he seeks an equality that does not need victories or wars, he is in fact, very close to the Gandhi's vision of swaraj (self-rule) based on truth and non-violence, which harmonizes the sacred and the secular into an inseparable civilization space:

"Under Swaraj based on non-violence, nobody is any body's enemy, everyday contributes his or her due quota to the common goal". (Gandhi, 1939). Gandhiji, like Murray, situates his good society or swaraj in the reign of truth and non-violence :-

My conception of swaraj is not mere political independence. I want to see Dhama Raj – establishment of the kingodm of heaven on earth, the reign of Truth and Non-violence in every walk of life. That alone is independence to the starved masses of this vast country. (Gandhi, 1945).

Murray's poem, "Walking to the Cattle Place" is a form of poetic satyagrah in the Gandhian sense for the establishment of a good society in which the humans, the hills, the wood, the cattle, the birds, the insects and all beings and non-beings alike-live in a symbiotic existence with the sun, the moon the stars and the elements. But his seeming utopian vision of "goloka" demands a satyagrah (soul or truth force) against the destructive impact of modern civilization in order to sufficiently spiritualise it. Murray aptly says:-

It would be something indeed, to break with western culture by not asking, even now, the characteristic second step into alienation, into elitism and the relegation of all places except one or two urban centres to the sterile status of provincial no-man's land largely deprived of any art or any creative self-confidence. This is what is at stake" (Murray cited in Wilde et al, 2000, p. 560).

It is only in Murray's imaginary "Goloka" or Gandhi's "Swaraj" that there would be no gap between "religion", "art" and " action". Murray affirms that religions are "poems" and "God is the poetry caught in any religion...a law against its closure/There'll always be religion around while there is poetry" (CP, 267).

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Bio-Fuels Initiatives in Southeast Asia: Options for India

Pankaj Kumar Jha*

Quite a number of countries in Southeast Asia have been looking for alternate sources of energy including nuclear energy. But the most prominent problem with nuclear energy has been the exploration, processing and disposal of the nuclear fuel. The disposal of the nuclear waste sometimes becomes a costly affair and also there are problems with regard to decommissioning of nuclear power plant. So the next best alternative has been the bio-fuels. Southeast Asia as a region has been taking giant strides in this context and each country has been taking its own route for practical use of bio fuels. The foremost among them have been Malaysia, Indonesia and Philippines. Thailand has also taken policy stance in this regard. But it would be a long time when bio fuels become an alternative to the non-renewable fuel. The paper discusses the initiatives taken by the countries of Southeast Asia and the legislative regulations that have been stipulated in this regard. It also analyses Indian stance in this regard and how it can cooperate with its south-eastern neighbours. The paper also discusses the problems associated with such a step and what could be fallouts of the bio fuel research and practical use.

In the contemporary world there is large scale dependence on fossil fuels for its energy needs, there are two other sources of energy, both of which manifest itself as electricity. These are hydroelectric power and nuclear power; each contributes significantly to global electric supply. The scope for increasing hydroelectric power is limited by the proximity of mountain terrain to urban centres of population and by the availability of land suitable for reservoirs, while that for nuclear power is affected by political considerations in addressing the perceived issues of safety and security. In the long term, the use of fossil fuels would be restricted owing to concerns over atmospheric pollution and later due to resource depletion. This might very well force the world community to move progressively from the fossil fuel age to renewable forms of energy that are non- polluting and secure in supply[1]. In this regard bio energy is the viable alternative in the present context.

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Bio energy is the general term for any form of renewable energy made from organic materials[2]. Biofuels are just one form of bio-energy. Specifically they are transportation fuels (ethanol and bio-diesel) made from renewable resources like corn and soyabeans[3]. Due to the fast depleting fossil fuel resources and the increasing carbon levels in the atmosphere the research and initiatives were taken for increasing the use of bio fuels. The increasing oil prices have also forced the high consumption countries in Asia to look for Bio fuel research and using it for energy production as well as for running vehicles.

The growing thrust towards a cleaner and greener environment has led to the search for more renewable sources of fuel and energy. The advent of Kyoto Protocol and its concomitant effects of carbon trading have provided impetus to renewed interest in bio fuels. Two of the more popular bio fuels are ethanol and bio diesel for gasoline and diesel engines respectively.

Ethanol is a high octane renewable fuel which can be produced from a number of different feed stocks like sugarcane, corn, cassava and other crops. Meanwhile bio diesel production uses domestic raw materials from coconut, oil palm, jatropha, used cooking oil and other bio mass sources. Thus a significant multiplier can cut across the supply chain form growing to manufacturing and logistics. The requirement for locally grown feed stocks will increase utilization of agricultural land, promote investment, and create jobs. Bio diesel is also an environment friendly product that drastically cut emissions[4].Europe has been at the forefront of bio fuel consumption and this surge in bio fuel demand as well their own domestic oil prices and support subsides compulsions have forced Southeast Asian countries for look for bio fuel option.

Southeast Asian countries, as emerging economies with a high potential for bio energy, continue to pursue a greater share of Bio energy in the power generation mix. High oil prices, fast growing oil import dependence, and strong impact on transport fuels are giving added impetus to substitution in favour of bio energy for stationary applications and the development of bio fuel extenders and substitutes for the transport sector. Understandably, Thailand and the Philippines are taking the lead in bio fuels with tax and financial incentives for focusing on promotion of bio fuel development and which in turn would give propulsion to the rural development.From Vietnam to Singapore to Indonesia, Asia is growing its bio fuels production base for fuel ethanol and bio diesel, ready for usage as well as export to India, China, Japan, Europe and US. The current pause is seen as transitory as the global emphasis on renewable energy is here to stay. The recent Philippines Bio fuels Act offers a booster for the regional bio fuels industry. It is estimated that the annual demand for ethanol will grow to the range of 200m and 400m litres. It is to be seen when will the other Asian countries roll out their bio fuels mandate?[5]

In fact Southeast Asia has been at the forefront of initiative with regard to bio-fuels with Malaysia and Indonesia leading the way owing to the successful use of palm oil for production of bio diesel[6] Prior to initiating any discourse about the bio fuels it is important to decipher the terminology about the bio-fuels. Bio fuel is one that does not add to the stock of total carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. These are plant forms that, typically, remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and give up the same amount when burnt. The bio fuels are therefore considered to be "CO_2 neutral", not adding to the carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere[7].Bio fuels are produced from living organisms or from metabolic by-products (organic or food waste products). In order to be considered a bio fuel the fuel must contain over 80 percent renewable materials[8].

Bio fuels give an alternative form of energy which is renewable and can be produced locally without relying on outside support. This ensures reduced reliance on imported fossil fuels for countries which have been dependent on external imports. The major attractions of bio diesel are:

- > It provides a transport fuel from a renewable source;
- > Reduces dependence on imported fuel
- > Can be distributed via the existing petroleum supply infrastructure;
- > Introduces a new rural industry and a new market for farmers;
- > Can be used in standard, unmodified diesel engines;
- > Contains no sulphur or aromatic compounds
- > Is bio degradable[9].

The countries of Southeast Asia have taken initiatives in this regard owing to the possibility of extracting fuels from bio mass and also from various seeds and palm oil. The result has been the institutionalisation of the bio fuels utilisation and also joint research in the areas.

Regional Initiatives in Southeast Asia

To address regions-wise energy issues, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Senior Officials Meeting on Energy (SOME) and the ASEAN Ministers of Energy Meeting are held annually for future regional policy and programmes. With the increasing recognition among the countries of southeast Asia that ASEAN is becoming increasingly dependent on oil imports, the countries of the region have been developing a mechanism for regional consultation and coordination during a petroleum supply shortage and emergency .But to address issues of long term security, energy mix and source diversification, sectoral efficiency, and environment sustainability, ASEAN policy makers continue to work towards the Trans-ASEAN Energy Network, made up of the ASEAN Power Grid (APG) and the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline. Also in terms of cooperation in energy efficiency and conservation various projects have been implemented including the ASEAN energy benchmarking system for building, ASEAN Energy Management Accreditation System (AEMAS) and ASEAN Standards and Labelling System. Apart from energy efficiency ASEAN has now looks towards cooperation in Renewable Energy (RE).[10] Even in the Second East Asian Summit stress was laid on energy efficiency and renewable sources of energy. But the initiatives that have been taken at the regional level have rather been at a nascent stage and more stress has been on exploring new sources of fossil fuels and energy efficiency. The initiatives at national level by the countries in southeast Asia has been encouraging. While countries like Indonesia and Malaysia are devising a bio fuel policy for earning that vital foreign exchange through bio fuel exports, Thailand and Philippines are looking for carefully implementing the bio fuels usage in domestic market.

Malaysia: Bio Diesel through Palm Oil

The production of bio diesel from palm oil had long been promoted by the Malaysian government, since 2001. According to the Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) Strategic Plan 2001-05, the focus on developing the country's capabilities in the production of bio diesel from palm oil is regarded as a 'defensive' strategy to increase the usage of the country's palm oil output while also propping up the commodity's price.

The MPOB Strategy Plan had identified its focus on 1) developing scaled up technologies for extraction of the minor component nutraceuticals from palm oil methyl ester (palm oil bio diesel); 2) attracting venture capitalists, and 3) getting government support through tax and regulatory measures.

Malaysia initiated National Bio fuel policy (also known as National Bio Diesel Policy) introduced by the Malaysian government basically entails a four pronged strategy, which encompasses

1. Producing a bio-diesel fuel blend of 5% processed palm oil with 95% petroleum diesel.
2. Encouraging the use of bio fuel among the public, which will involve giving out incentives for oil retail companies to provide bio diesel pumps at stations.
3. Establishing an industry standard for bio diesel quality, this will be the responsibility of regulatory body.
4. Setting up of a palm oil bio diesel plant, which is targeted to be built in Labu, Negri Sembilan.

In addition, the government would set up a demonstration mill for the production of bio fuel for cold climates, which is a strategy for the marketing of Malaysia's bio fuel in the export markets. The government would also award a contract to a plantation company to ensure a consistent supply of palm oil for the production of palm oil bio fuel. It also provided some sort of incentive to automotive companies to produce bio fuel-ready engines. To encourage the use of bio fuel on a trial basis, oil companies have been asked to cooperate with the Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) to create pioneer kiosks. In the longer term, the National Bio Diesel Policy will include establishing a National Bio Fuel Industry Act as well as providing several more incentives[11].

The major factors for initiating concrete approach towards bio fuel have been the need for blending of diesel with palm oil based bio diesel to power cars and electricity generators and the likely increase in its demand from countries like Japan, South Korea and Europe. Petronas has been planning to build a 200,000 tonne per year methyl ester plant. Malaysia is aiming to gain at least 10 per cent of the market share of bio fuels owing to the expansion in the demand of bio fuels by 25 per cent each year since 2004[12]. Malaysia has also been getting investments from Australia and Italy for setting up of the commercial bio diesel plant in that country.

With some 75 bio diesel projects either in operation or in the pipeline, Malaysia is already considerably ahead of Indonesia. Golden

Hope Plantations, Genting BhD and Sime Darby BhD[13] are the major bio diesel players some of which have expanded their franchises into Indonesia based plantations.

Indonesia: Looking for Bio-fuels Options

In the face of its depleting oil reserves and fluctuating world oil prices, Indonesia has launched bio fuel production program aimed at cutting its fossil fuel consumption by 10 per cent in 2010. Besides reducing dependence on fossil fuels, the cultivation of bio fuel crops such as palm oil, Sugarcane and Jatropha curcas crops were also seen as a way to boost local economies. In order to carry out the programme, the Indonesian government decided to set up a national team formulating policies for the development of bio fuel or bio diesel programme, including matters of cultivation of land, infrastructure, processing, marketing and funding. Under the programme the Indonesian government has stressed on the development of 11 bio diesel plants in various parts of the country. The plants will have a total production capacity of 26,000 tons per annum equal to about 45 per cent of annual consumption in Jakarta. An inter ministerial team estimated that the country's bio diesel production would; reach 187 million litres by the end of 2007 and 1.3 billion litres in 2010. Indonesian government is also preparing fiscal incentives for investment, trade and research to enhance bio fuel production[14].

Indonesia also faces wrath of the environmentalists while pursuing its energy development programme owing to the availability of peat land soils there. Peat land rainforests are wet swampy rainforests that when drained and cleared, their peat filled soil become highly susceptible to long burning, carbon and methane rich fires. Such rainforests on peat soils are one of the world's most important carbon sinks and play a vital role in helping to regulate the global climate[15]. The peat lands are likely to be destroyed for palm oil, timber and paper and pulp companies. So the balance of controlling carbon emissions and absorption through nature has become a major issue between the environmentalists and development proponents. It would be seen how Indonesia balances the two different points of view.

Vietnam: Nurturing Newer Forms of Bio –Fuels

Vietnam has been slow in initiating the various options for bio fuels. One of those is to turn Catfish fat into bio fuel to run diesel engines. One of the major catfish exporters Agifish had sought government approval to build a factory in the southern Mekong delta province of An Giang and had proposed for production of about 10 million litres of fuel. The Vietnamese government had given the clearance for the same. In fact Vietnam had been exporting catfish to US and Europe but in the past the catfish exports had faced sanctions and quota restrictions and so catfish has been seen as a viable alternative to fossil fuels. Vietnam could also look into the options of ethanol but due to the scarcity of sugarcane, it had been looking for other alternatives also. Bio Fuels Researchers at the Centre for Petrochemical Technology in Vietnam have been looking at mixing the waste cooking oil with diesel to make cheaper fuel. In fact the two-year pilot project initiated in 2006 has endorsed use of waste cooking oil for this project. This would also reduce pollution in the streams and rivers.

Vietnam has not embarked in a big way as compared to its other ASEAN partners with regard to Bio Fuels but has made significant steps in the field of research.

Myanmar: Search for Alternatives

Myanmar is planning to grow castor bean on 50,000 acres in each of its nine military divisions for use as bio fuel[16]. It has the climatic conditions and soil conducive for production of castor beans. Myanmar has been relying on the extensive gas and oil deposits and so has not looked at the options of bio fuels in a major way. Owing to its isolation in ASEAN, it has not been able to get technology relevant for bio fuel research.

Laos: Lack of Investments

Within Laos whatever steps have been taken in bio-fuel research has been through small Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) like Sunlabob. One of the options that have been explored is getting oil from Jatropha seeds. The oil is comparable to diesel and after processing can be used as Bio Diesel in motor vehicles. The Laos Association of Organic Farmers had explored the viability of Jatropha oil in Laos[17]. Jatropha oil had been used in Motors for generating electricity. But more than anything those NGOs which are working in the field of rural electrification and generating Bio diesel options have also been facing resource crunch. More than anything else due to the lack of funds even from the government channels, the NGOs have set out for investors so that the pilot project on rural electrification through *Jatropha* could be launched in a more comprehensive way.

Philippines: More Legislative Enforcement

The Philippines President Gloria Macapaghal Arroyo had urged member countries of ASEAN to begin producing flexible fuels engines for vehicles that can run on bio fuels. Also at the national level, Philippines had initiated a law known as the Bio Fuels Act of 2006. The new law ordains a minimum one percent of bio fuel blended to diesel within the first year of its inception which should be increased to four to five percent in next two years. The law provides tax exemption, financial incentives to encourage investments in bio fuels[18].The law is in consistence with the declaration on East Asian Energy Security ratified by the 16 heads of the states or government of ASEAN and its dialogue partners during the second East Asian Summit in Philippines[19].

Philippines has also initiated dialogue with Thailand to pursue the development of common standards for bio fuels. Philippines had therefore proposed to start a workshop that would allow countries to exchange information on the status of their respective national efforts on developing bio fuels standards and to determine the next steps for future also Philippines has planned to plant more than 1 million hectares of Jatropa[20]. Diversification of renewable fuel sources has been the agenda for Philippines which is duly supported by government and public sector initiatives.

Singapore: Developing Refining Capacity

It is known fact that Singapore lacks the agricultural land for growing any bio fuel feed stock. Owing to its technological superiority and management skills it has opted for providing a large bio diesel refining and processing facility. Singapore is well placed to develop such an industry as it has easy access to palm oil, a key bio diesel ingredient. Peter Cremer, the Asian arm of Germany's Cremer gruppe, plans to set up a $ 20 million plant in Singapore by 2007 with enough capacity to produce 200,000 tonnes of Bio diesel[21]. Apart from that Natural fuel, global group of renewable energy companies, headquartered in Western Australia, announced that they have chosen Singapore as its site for their US$ 130 million state of the art bio diesel production facility which is scheduled to start production in 2007. The facility would have an annual production capacity of 600,000 metric tonnes of bio diesel. Singapore has been chosen as the location for the bio diesel facility owing to its strategic location, better logistics facility and experience in petrochemical industry[22] which projects the future potential of Singapore as a regional hub for bio diesel facility. As already Singapore has the world's third largest oil refinery centre and due to growing awareness about bio fuels in Southeast Asia the new refining and production facility is surely going to enhance Singapore's standing at the regional level for Bio diesel production. Malaysia also has been keen on promoting Singapore as a bio diesel refining centre due to its proximity with Johor. Malaysia, had made plans in the past for a petro chemical hub at Jurong Island[23] but due to stiff global competition, it has now planned for setting up bio fuel production facility in Johor which is closer to Singapore border.

Thailand: The Jatropha and Ethanol Option

Bio Fuels have been promoted in Thailand in the past through a bio fuels product known as Gasohol 95 or so called E-10 which is a mixture of ethanol and Octane 91 gasoline at a ratio of 1 to 9. The Thai government has approved in 2005, a budget of $32.5 for Bio diesel development during 2005-2012 and has also initiated a phased plan for production of bio fuels[24].

Thailand, with its abundant agricultural resources, is well positioned to effectively deploy bio-fuels-ethanol and bio diesel in helping meet its energy needs. For production of ethanol to produce gasohol, Thailand can produce ethanol from sugarcane, cassava and oil palm. At present, there are altogether 6 private sector plants that have been approved to produce ethanol, with a total production capacity of 1.09 million litres/day[25].These initiatives are part of the Thai government plan for self reliance in bio fuels sector. The Thai Government has formulated a two phase gasohol (gasoline-ethanol blend) programme. In phase 1 (2004-2006), in addition to the three ethanol plants currently operating, three others became partially operational by 2006, For phase 2 (2007-2012), the government awarded licences to 18 new bio diesel plants, and this is expected to bring the total installed capacity to 3 million litres/day by 2012. Of the 18 new plants in phase 2, 14 will use molasses as feedstock and the remaining four will be cassava based. Thailand is world's largest producer of cassava, with an average output of 20 million tons a year. The key element of Thai Government's strategic plan for bio diesel is plantation development for the vegetable oil crops to be used as feedstock, palm oil, Jatropha. The government plans to develop palm plantations totalling 0.7 million hectares which would yield 4.8 million litres/day of bio diesel[26]. Thailand has initiated a structured approach with regard to bio-fuels but how far it would be feasible in the long run is yet to be seen.

India's Steps in Bio Fuel Production

In India the bio fuel gained momentum in the post-2000 phase, when the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural gas decided to take up pilot projects at three locations in the major sugar producing states of Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh to study the related aspects of blending ethanol with petrol and its use. In March 2002, the government gave the permission for the sale of E-5[27] across India. In September 2002, Indian government mandated that nine states and four union territories would have to sell E-5 by law from January 2003 onwards. Their combined demand was estimated at 345000 cubic metres per year. This was accompanied by an excise duty exemption for ethanol. In the next phase, supply of 5% ethanol blended petrol would be extended to the whole country. In view of the supply constraints from the sugar industry, the project was facing difficulties and with the failure of sugar crops in 2003-2004, India has had to import moiasses and even ethanol to meet domestic needs[28]. So the success of the programme has been hampered by problems related to feed stocks supply, price agreements and reluctance of domestic oil companies.

On the other hand the National Mission bio diesel programme consists of two phases .The first phase consists of demonstration projects covering both forest and non forest lands in various states across the country. The phase two of the mission would focus on uncovered areas with a target to achieve 20 per cent blending of bio diesel with diesel.

The Phase II of national mission is proposed to be people driven with the government playing the role of facilitator. It aims to expand the programme to cover up to 11 million hectare in phase II. The implementation will be done in a phased manner. The first step is to achieve a 5 per cent bio diesel blend in diesel in nine states; then aim at a 5 per cent bio diesel blend all over the country. Later the bio diesel percentage would be increased to 10 per cent across the country and lastly work towards more than 10 per cent bio diesel blend in the entire country.

In fact India can tap the $ 52 billion global market for carbon trading by encouraging production and use of bio fuels and plantation of trees having oil bearing seeds and materials like Jatropha and Pongamia species. Other plantations having oil bearing seeds or materials are Sal, Mahua, Kokun, Pilu, Phulwara, Dhuipa, Neem, Mago, Kusum, Karanja, Ratanjyot, Tumba, Jojoba and Simarouba[29].

Unlike the countries like Malaysia or Thailand, the use of edible oils for bio diesel production is not an option for India at this stage since edible oils and seeds should be used to fulfil other primary needs. Some of the plants like Jatropha can be grown in areas with low availability of water and even in arid lands. Countries like Thailand are seeking Jatropha seeds from India to sustain their bio fuel production while India does not have a clear cut policy about the production and extraction of oil from Jatropha, though in Hyderabad a private sector company has initiated cultivation of Jatropha in an area of 45 hectares. Indian policy has not seen the light of the day or has been much more concerned about the fluctuating fuel prices rather than looking for alternatives.

So, for India in order to gain distinct advantages with regard to Bio fuel sector, it has to develop infrastructure and transport in the mainland Southeast Asia and also engage Indonesia in a bigger way in order to have greater economies of scale and also reap the benefits of advancement of technology in the bio fuel sector. India would also have to strengthen sub regional organisations like Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) while reviving stagnant organisations like Mekong Ganga Cooperation. Energy is the buzz word for the next decade and in order to strengthen its energy security apart from looking at new areas of fossil fuel supply it has to secure supplies in terms of bio fuels. Ethanol might be a big foreign exchange saver for India in the coming decade, as has happened in the case of Brazil, Due to large area under sugarcane cultivation India can provide cheap ethanol option to the countries of Southeast Asia. In case of Jatropha. India has to devise a policy and also look for available area for cultivation of this economic nut. The foreign exchange saving and environment protection options are there.

Drawbacks of Bio- Fuels

It is not that Bio Fuels are the best available option but it is true that it is the only visible option. Firstly Bio diesel promotion has been facing wrath of the environmentalists in the past, because though it reduces the carbon emission but it also leads to deforestation for production of palm oil which in a way imbalances the carbon absorption capacity in nature. There has been a serious row of words between the western countries and Malaysia and Indonesia because of their plans for deforestation for availing more land for palm oil plantations. Also Bio fuels are expensive as growing sufficient crops to satisfy global energy demand require large tracts of land.

Secondly, Bio fuels pertaining to the energy security and with increasing oil prices might become a lucrative option for agricultural farmers to opt for production of such oil rich cash crops and this would lead to shortages of food and thus impoverishment of poorer nations of the world. Bio Fuels are cost effective only when fossil fuel prices hover between $75-80 per barrel otherwise large scale production can only offset the costs disadvantages. Thirdly, bio diesel facility and even consumption has not been projected as a cost effective option and so until and unless there is large scale production and consumption bio diesel might not find many takers in the near future. Also the availability and distribution of bio diesel is another problem. Due to the mixing of water in ethanol blend fuel might damage engines in the long run. So the options have to be carefully weighed for greater benefits of any such global initiative.

How Feasible are the other Alternatives

Looking for the other alternatives like solar energy and hydro power, the depleting water resources and growing global population has put a question mark on the likely sustainability of hydropower while on the other hand, solar power has few takers but the equipment and research in this area is quite costly. Also solar power might not be a feasible alternative for motor cars but can be a suitable source for electrification. On the other hand wind energy and geo thermal energy are good options but these are not cost effective.

Taking the issue of cleaner fuels like nuclear energy, the problem of exploration, processing, reprocessing and disposal of nuclear fuels is the most costly option and also the decommissioning of any nuclear power plant is a very tedious process with a risk factor attached to it because of devastating nuclear fissile material leakage incidents in the past in Russia and US. The other forms of energy like hydrogen are not very cost effective and also technology pertaining to develop those areas of energy have been the forte of western countries and few private players and so the Bio fuels as has been discussed provide the only cost effective and low technology option for the developing countries of Asia.

Conclusion

Countries in southeast Asia have taken few concrete steps to promote use of bio fuels but more than anything the regional efforts and research and development of Bio fuels has not taken off in a big way. Owing to the surge in demand of bio fuels in Europe and other western countries have given an revenue option for countries like Malaysia and Indonesia while Singapore wants to leverage its strategic location in this regard. Philippines has taken few legislative measures for the same but it is to be seen how the government employs those regulations and in which way people abide to use bio fuels. Thailand on the other hand has a clearer policy but has been clamouring for more research and funds in the area. Thailand is not very sure of the feasibility of the projects initiated and with the aim to diversify has started looking for supply of Jatropha from countries like India. Vietnam and Laos does have the potential but then Vietnam has huge gas reserves as alternative while Laos has not enough funds to support the use of Bio fuels. Myanmar has the will and also the land mass for necessary production of feedstock but lacks any technical know-how in this regard.

In such a milieu it would be feasible for most of the countries of Southeast Asia to pool their technical know-how and also diversify their resources as well as options for extracting bio fuels in the long run because only then the countries in the region would be able to have a comparative cost benefit analysis of the options available. Bio fuels have the potential to give a boost to agricultural economies and thus it might narrow the gap between the prosperous and not so prosperous nations of the region. India can gain through greater integrated cooperation with the countries of Southeast Asia because the time line for implementation of cleaner energy and bio fuels in the region is pegged at 2010. India can enhance its capability with regard to research in the area and also as it has large tracts of barren lands which could be used for cultivation of Jatropha. India can derive economic benefits also in this area. The countries like Thailand and Myanmar are working in the field of ethanol and Jatropha while Mynamar is slowly looking into the economic benefits of castor oil as the feed stock for Bio fuels. The complementarities are many and so India should engage the region in the bio fuel sector also.

Bio fuels are a better futuristic option and an integrated policy would do wonders in this regard. More than anything the western countries have to initiate transfer of technology to the countries of the region rather than making hue and cry over deforestation so as to save precious forests and create a balance between carbon emission and absorption, because better technology would initiate energy efficiency as well as lower cost of production. Bio fuels are also viable option for generating employment in the rural sector and mitigating environmental pollution which has been increasing at an alarming rate due to use of fossil fuels. In this milieu it is important to pool resources and once again India could very well leverage its Look East Policy.

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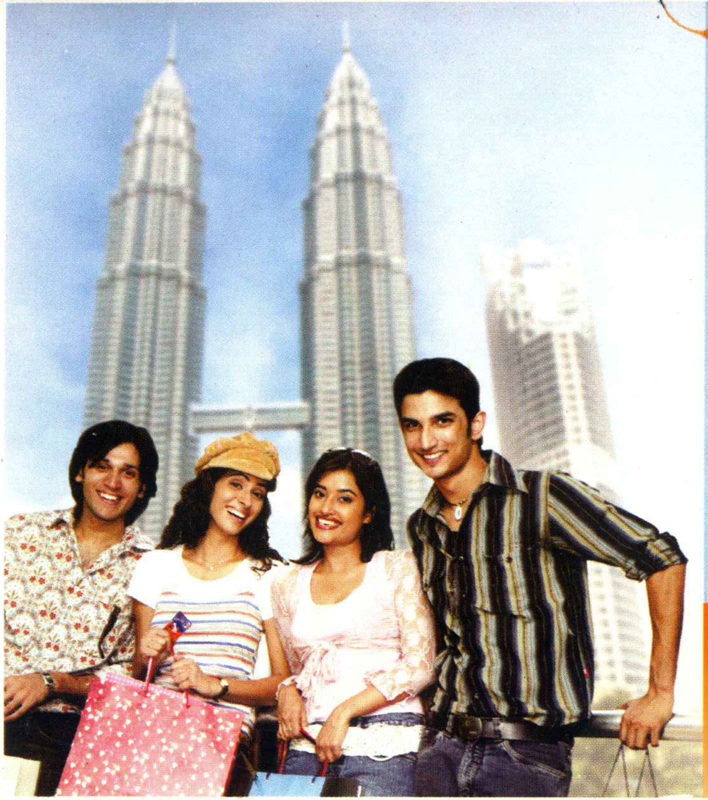

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